Ex Machina

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Ex Machina

by ilikeexploding

Summary

> *"How do you know you're talking to an extroverted engineer? He looks at* your *shoes when he's talking to you."*
>
> Adopt their costumes and pageantry. Form yourself into something quaint but harmless. With his scruff and plaid and social awkwardness and lack of eye contact, Will Graham is, for the first time in his life, normal.
>
> The FBI agents and psychologists knocking on his doorstep won't change that.
>
> AU: Instead of going into law enforcement, Will decides to major in computer science in college instead. Partially inspired by Mr. Robot (only by premise - there is no Mr. Robot plotline).

Notes

> Obviously not all programmers are antisocial weirdos, but I definitely think that Will would get more of a "pass" if he was surrounded by software engineers whose general attitude is "who cares, as long as he gets the project done", than FBI agents and criminal psychologists specifically looking to grab bits and pieces of his so-called unique brain.
>
> I definitely believe that part of Will's issues came from being in an environment where everyone had this fascination with serial killers, especially when he was known as and reduced to "the guy who can think like a murderer". The people he regularly came in contact with kept looking at him like there was something wrong with him, and after awhile he too became convinced that denying himself was just the better route.
>
> Outside of that world, however, most don't think or care about killers. In a world where "problems" means getting a project done on time, being antisocial is less of a warning bell and more of an acceptable quirk. And if Will's colleagues judged his value based on a skill he had to work for, rather than an ability that was also a side effect of some poorly understood "mental problem", I think Will would be a happier person with a greater sense of self-worth. Will was genuinely good at fixing boat motors because he's smart, nothing to do with his "special ability"; there's no reason why he couldn't have transferred that into some other engineering field.
>
> The private fascination/guilt with death and murder might still be there, but he would overall be less vulnerable and isolated. (Especially since now he is specialized in a completely

different field that Hannibal has less experience in and thus less control over.)

Logic Gate

Chapter Summary

A small ripple completely changes the course of Will Graham's life.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

20 Years Ago

Another new town, another new school. Another new group of people to barely form any attachment to, seeing as they were going to move within the next year, anyway.

Will had long given up on attempting to navigate the public school social scene. He went to class and kept his head down, his classmates at bay, his marks average enough to invite neither applause nor scrutiny from his teachers. The goal was to be forgettable enough to be left alone.

Due to an incident that had happened the year before Will arrived – something about a large group of "cool kids" sneaking off campus and then ditching – students were all corralled into one area during lunch so the teachers could keep watch on them. The result was basically hell; too many loud voices and feelings all shoved into one place. There were not enough tables for Will to get one all to himself, so he was forced to choosing between the three emptiest. One had been claimed by a rather unfriendly looking group that would probably chase him away the moment he sat down, one was definitely inhabited by current or future addicts, and the last one –

Situated in the corner, there were four other students sitting there already, each staggered two feet apart from the other in an attempt to maximize distance. None were speaking to each other. Two were reading, one was staring down at his food and eating it slowly so he wouldn't have to look up and talk to the others, and the fourth was fiddling with a calculator.

My kind of people, Will thought glumly. Maybe if he showed that he, too, was willing to partake in this mutual antisocial pact, they would let him sit there without too much fuss. He approached the table carefully, giving a quick scan to make sure that none of them reacted – and they all simply stared harder at their own choice of distraction – he sat down at the furthest corner and began eating his own lunch.

Nothing came of it, and what a relief.

The next day, Will sat there again, and spent his break period in silence. And the day after that. Soon, there came an easy comraderie that only formed within a group of people that all

collectively shied from it. None of them were really friends, but it was safe, and everyone else left them alone.

Will would have been content with the rest of the school year passing by in a similar manner, but of course science fair partner project season came along – something none of them could escape. Glancing around in panic while the rest of the class ran after their friends, Will's eyes suddenly landed on Calculator Boy (neither of them had asked each other's names since Will first sat at that table) at the same time Calculator Boy looked up at him.

The rest of the class had found their pairs, and so Will was left with the one person who he just might possibly be able to get along with. All things concerned, it was actually not too bad.

"I'm James," Calculator Boy muttered.

"Will."

"I want a good grade."

"I can fix boat motors. Engines," Will offered.

"Can you do wires?"

"A little."

"My dad has some old toy remote cars and computer chips. We can use those for our robot."

"Okay."

That was it. Two historically friendless kids stumbling through social niceties together sounded like a recipe for disaster, but it really wasn't. James didn't really push Will around, and Will didn't really pick anything up from James either. No raging hormones, no noisy preteen/teenage drama, no *which girl I want to ask for the dance*, *Brad is cheating on me I just know it, I'm totally going to beat up that kid later* bullshit. James disliked sports, liked math class, didn't really hate anything, and was happiest messing around on the fancy Texas Instruments graphing calculator that he probably spent months saving up for. The same sense of boring calm that Will got from working on a tricky boat motor.

That weekend, they knocked out the project in a few hours, did a good enough job to get the A that James wanted, and went back to eating lunch in silence together the next day. Afterwards, James let Will keep their crappy little robot. "My dad has more stuff in his garage. I can build another one, easy."

"Oh. Thanks."

"Um. Yeah. See you around."

Will never really talked to James again. Shortly after, Beau Graham's work and money ran out, and they had to move back South. But Will never really forgot the sense of peace he had,

that weekend at James' house, simply building something kinda cool with someone else who didn't really care about his social slip-ups.

Machines were calm and predictable things, but still interesting enough in their complexity to keep his attention. They did exactly what you told them to do if you knew what you were doing. And the people who worked on them cared more about the machines than Will himself. Will could work with that. It was easy, he realized, to talk to people if they were both talking about a faceless block of metal. A flattened rock with plastic and lightning that humans tricked into thinking, no blood or breath or feelings, drawing more attention than him.

Machines and numbers – puzzles difficult enough to completely silence all other stray thoughts in Will's head, and yet so simple and elegant and *clean* in their design. More simple than all the foreign feelings that normally inhabited his skull, anyway. If he was busy concentrating on something so complex and intricate, he had no time or energy to remember everything else that would sizzle in the background. Machines took up his computing power without any of the mess that came with human emotions. Will never knew himself so well as when he was alone with machines and numbers, with things that thought but did not feel.

Beau Graham was an alcoholic and a mostly absent father, but at the very least he tried to give Will a life and future, when he could. It had been his hope and dream that Will would be the first Graham to go to college, never mind his hatred for them damn rich Yanks up north. Will could see through his eyes as if they were his own, resigned to his life being belittled as redneck trailer trash, but determined to give a different fate for his different boy.

What few photographs Beau had of Will's grandfather and great-grandfather revealed a telling story – all of them gruff, barrel-chested, working boys who grew into gruff, barrel-chested working men. All of them until Will, a tiny thing who thought too much. Out-of-place in the world he had been born into, but perhaps it was enough to get a foot in the door of the glittering universe of permanent housing and salaried pay.

"Yer a smart boy, Willy," he'd say. "My father worked wif his hands, and his father before him, but yeh can do somefin' wif yer life other than bein' poor." He might not have understood how Will's dinky little science fair robot worked, let alone how Will himself worked, but every once in awhile, he'd come back with bits and bobbles that he thought might be useful. Most of them had little to do with computer electronics, what with Beau being a boat mechanic, but every once in awhile he got lucky with a newer boat that had an electronic navigation system, and those he would bring home for Will to take apart.

That alone would have probably not been enough, since they didn't have enough money to buy a PC, but it did give him enough experience to get a job as a clerk at a computer store the summer Will was sixteen. It paid a little better than a paper route and definitely much better than under-the-table dishwashing, and the old man who owned the store let him sift through the abandoned chips and CPUs and user manuals and programming textbooks when his work was done for the day. Instead of Gacy and Dahmer, he spent his afternoons with Hennessy and Patterson [1]. Instead of bite patterns and psychopath tests, he buried his head in Assembly and C. He scavenged spare parts and built his own computer. He exhausted himself

with transistors and logic diagrams until his eyes glazed over, leaving little room in his head for anything else.

Before this, nothing had been able to stave off his nightmares, to stop his mind from going haywire in all directions, to stop his eyes from noticing and asking *is that a burst vein or maybe he has hepatitis husband hits her father drinks too much too much too much* –

```
STOP

char* ptr;

ptr = (char*) calloc(UINT_MAX, sizeof(char));


SEGMENTATION FAULT (core dumped) [2]
```

Machines were the right type of difficult to keep him challenged, and the right type of boring to shut his mind out to everything else. The right type of complicated that staring at it for long enough would calm his racing heart and make him forget all the other monsters dwelling inside his head. Every second he spent debugging a KERNEL PANIC [3] was a second he could postpone the return of the darkness –

And when it came time to apply to college and pick majors, Will hesitated over his original top choice of criminal justice and psychology.

Ever since he was little, he'd thought about becoming a cop. Catching bad guys. That sort of thing.

He could do it. He'd be good at it. He'd never considered being any good for anything else.

But then Will remembered James and his garage, and just how damn *happy* he had been then. Just for a few hours, but when compared to an entire lifetime of pain and nightmares, even those few hours were precious. When he could feel his brain resembling the clean, orderly layout of the insides of a computer, instead of the disorganized soup of maggoty decomposing swamp that it normally was. When instead of forts desperately keeping everything boxed in so they didn't overflow and break free, everything was already nicely, neatly assembled into their designated addresses [4].

I could spend the rest of my life feeling like that, Will thought. For the first time in his life, he considered being something else.

Even if this failed, he could go back to working at a computer store – repairing a common appliance was less physically demanding and more stable than the season-dependent gigs that a struggling boat mechanic suffered, so Beau couldn't really complain.

Will still had the robot.

Chapter End Notes

In case you're confused by all the jargon and references:

[1] Hennessy and Patterson are the authors of Computer Architecture: A Quantitative Approach, first published 1989. This is considered one of the landmark computer science textbooks. Pretty much everyone in tech has heard of this or used it in their studies. It's as standard to the CS field as canon Will's monograph on insect activity was to forensics, for example (though he won't write that paper this time around). [↑]

[2] This bit of code basically says, "Hey computer, turn 4GB of space into zeros." Naturally this won't work if a computer doesn't have that much space (segmentation fault). From a narrative perspective, it's Will telling himself to clear his mind of all the excessive thoughts he doesn't need until there's nothing left to clear and he crashes. [↑]

[3] The kernel is the core of your computer and has complete control over everything. A kernel panic means something has gone catastrophically wrong. If you've ever experienced the Blue Screen of Death, chances are it was caused by a kernel panic. It's one of the most frustrating problems because they can be caused by anything and are often nondeterministic, meaning you can do the same exact thing multiple times and get different results each time – the opposite of that famous insanity quote by Einstein. Even the most seasoned, talented developers consider hunting for the source of a kernel panic hell. For Will, however, it's a perfect way to occupy weeks that would have otherwise been spent alone with his thoughts, putting him in the perfect position to be one of those special programmers who can solve problems literally no one else can figure out. [↑]

[4] Computers store information at addresses, like how libraries organize books on shelves. [↑]

Compiler

Chapter Summary

Will and Hannibal meet for the first and second time.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Present Day

Palo Alto, California

"I swear, you can never tell who's a millionaire and who's a hobo here," Alana laughed as a Tesla full of young men in worn hoodies and sneakers rolled by.

Hannibal returned her smile while he eyed the café dubiously. He smelled real, properly roasted coffee beans, so at the very least the quality would be tolerable, but he suspected that the additives would contain too much sugar, and the "artisanal, handmade, Italian-style" claims were only there to inflate the price to twice the reasonable value without actually being made by a proper expert. Still, all of Hannibal's own coffee brewing equipment was back in Baltimore, and this was better than the corn-syrup-sweetened, mass-produced chain store alternative.

"Appearances are deceptive," he agreed noncommittally. The nouveau riche of the West Coast were a different breed than the old money types he was used to, though no less dull and superficial. Wealth and high society tended to favor the same sorts. The classic dance of pretending one did not care what others thought of them, while doing nothing *but* care about public perception, of themselves or of their peers. Judging, without understanding of true value or worth, all in the name of having culture.

Hopefully the psychiatric conference he and Alana were attending would be more interesting. There was one benefit to Stanford as opposed to Johns Hopkins – Chilton wasn't able to make it.

The line inside was surprisingly long despite the abnormally overpriced selection. Hannibal rarely paid attention to cost during his search for quality, but even here he could recognize that half the value was simply factoring in the rent money for the land on which the café sat.

"Is it normally this crowded?" Alana asked their neighbor in line.

The girl took out an earbud to answer. "Nah, there's some big conference today."

There was an indignant sputter from beside her. "It's not just *some* big conference, are you kidding me?"

Alana frowned. "I didn't expect psychology to be so popular."

"What?"

"The psychiatric conference, right?"

"There's a psych conference?"

Alana raised an eyebrow. "Didn't you just say that?"

"No, I was talking about the hackathon," the girl said. "I didn't realize there was a psychology conference, ha! Is that what you're here for? I guess it's good that there's something else going on. If I have to listen to one more tech bro brag about their brand new light-up mechanical keyboard…"

"Excuse you, there's nothing wrong with light-up mechanical keyboards!" her companion protested, crossing his arms over his logo-printed t-shirt.

"Dennis, I don't care if you like to use one, just don't expect me to be as enthusiastic about them as you are. Stop yammering about it, or I'll go insane!"

"Good thing there's a psychiatric conference in town, then," Hannibal quipped, to some light laughter. Just then, however, he felt a jostle, and then warm liquid all the way down his front.

"Move it!"

Hannibal looked up furiously to see another one of the perpetually scruffy, plaid, lumberjack-hipster, types that seemed to dominate the Bay Area almost as much as the hoodie-and-jeans hobo-millionaire army. He was ready to add the man to his menu, but when the man mumbled a quick "sorry," he realized that the voice was completely different. Looking further over his shoulder, he could see a different man walking away, yelling loudly into his bluetooth earpiece.

"Wasn't your fault," Alana said, tone full of righteous indignation. "I ought to follow after that guy who bumped into you and give him a piece of my mind, honestly."

Hannibal would have liked to do that, plus a little more, but he put on a forgiving face and accepted the wad of "100% recycled!"-printed paper napkins that she passed him. "You would only be wasting your time. People like that are unlikely to change. Better to focus your energy on more beneficial tasks."

Alana, always so trusting, deferred to his judgment. "I suppose you're right. That man is lucky you're more magnanimous than I am."

Hannibal smiled to himself. If only she knew.

The man stared forlornly at his now half-empty coffee cup, stained brown on the outside. "Hope you weren't emotionally attached to that suit."

"It's quite alright; I have others," Hannibal accepted the napkins graciously, though they did little good against the coffee that had now already soaked into his shirt. He mourned the loss of a perfectly good target – he hadn't gotten a good look at face or identity of the rude man, and the man whose coffee had actually been spilled hadn't been rude enough to warrant a similar reaction.

"I can pay for the dry cleaning or something," the man muttered again, determinedly staring at the floor and denying Hannibal the chance to get a good look at his face.

Hannibal smiled. "Not a fan of eye contact, are you?"

The man rolled his eyes. "All the engineers and programmers in this town and you single me out?"

"I apologize, that was not my intention. Please, allow me to buy you a new cup," Hannibal nodded at the floor, where the puddle of coffee was slowly spreading.

"Nah, it's fine. I'll just get another one for free at work."

"Surely the coffee machines in the office aren't as good," Hannibal said. He'd heard enough complaints about Alana and Jack to know the sorry state of FBI coffee.

"They're actually not bad. I just shelled out for this today because I wanted to see what all the fuss was about. Anyway, let me know about the dry cleaning." He finished off what little was left in his cup, placed the paper cup in the green biodegrable waste bin, and shuffled back for more napkins.

"Really, it's not necessary. You're not the one at fault here," Hannibal prodded.

"Neither were you."

"I insist," Hannibal said. "Money is not the issue here."

He half-expected the man to continue arguing further – he did so love playing around with these social norms of offering and denying payment – but the man simply shrugged and said, "If you say so."

Then he walked out the door.

And that was it.

"Well, that was a bit abrupt," Alana said. Some might even call it rude, but Hannibal oddly felt a little charmed. There was something to be said about direct communication. It was only after the man had gone that he realized he hadn't even asked for a name. She turned back to the front again, only to come face-to-face with a gaping face.

"Is something wrong?" Alana asked, concerned.

The young man from the line, Dennis, shut his mouth. "Do you have *any idea* who you were just talking to?"

"Leave it, Dennis; no one does. Tone down your fanboying."

"Excuse *me* for appreciating one of the most legendary contributors to literally everything in the history of everything more than some random pop star!" he shot back hotly.

Alana shot Hannibal a curious look, and he gave a helpless shrug as the bickering young couple continued to be of no help.

"Dennis! They're calling our order!"

Hannibal supposed they might have been ships in the night had it not been for Jack Crawford, so he made a mental note for a relatively quick death should the time ever come.

"Never expected to be back in California so soon," said Alana. It had only been three months since the Stanford conference, and now they were back in the particular flavor of West Coast excess – cars and gadgets and market shares, as opposed to the old money elite of Baltimore, peddling trade and political influence. There was definitely much of that here, too – an excess of money always found their way back to politicians eventually – but there was a greater focus on the new and shiny that was entirely foreign.

"All the fingerprints and DNA evidence the lab techs managed to identify could be explained away by coincidence," Crawford explained, as they walked past the sleek, curved, glass-and-steel constructions so favored by large tech companies these days. There was a certain brutal, cold sort of beauty to some of them, Hannibal supposed, though they couldn't possibly compare to the Renaissance cathedrals and domes of Italy. "The main suspect's a plumber by trade, so he had an excuse to be in all of the victims' houses."

"That's very well and fascinating, but I don't see why we are needed," Hannibal said. "Surely your forensics team is enough."

"We need to access his phone for more evidence. Unfortunately, it's locked and encrypted, and while we have permission to search it, the suspect is under no legal obligation to provide the password. The normal techs we have on duty have been unable to figure it out."

"So now we're here, at company headquarters, to ask them to unlock the phone for us," Alana finished. "Is that even legal?"

"I presume federal lawyers arguing public safety alone aren't going to be enough to persuade them," Hannibal said. "I am not an expert, but if terrorist threats can't convince these companies to introduce backdoors into their phones, what makes you think a single killer will?"

"Well, I was hoping you two would help with that," Jack muttered curtly, and Hannibal was once again astounded at how the man had gotten this far in life, let alone why his superiors even allowed this meeting in the first place.

As they stepped through the sliding doors into the lobby, they were greeted by some executives and lawyers – all dressed frightfully casually in Hannibal's opinion, but he supposed the culture was different here. Introductions were made, visitors' badges affixed. They were led through another series of sliding doors into an elevator lobby, where the displays were formed from backlit touchscreens instead of the usual pushbutton-and-numbers affair that had been perfectly acceptable in every other building in the world.

"Before I forget, is anyone here allergic to dogs? This is a dog-friendly office. No? Good." They were led through another series of corridors before they came to a stop at a conference room, as blindingly white-and-glass as the rest of the building. All three walls were covered with a smooth, plasticky coating, and a basket full of dry-erase whiteboard markers hung affixed to one of the corners.

"If I may start – " Jack began, but one of the executives cut him off.

"I apologize, we're still waiting for one more person."

"He can't be on time?" Jack asked.

"He's in high demand, I'm afraid," the exec said apologetically, "being one of our most valued and knowledgeable technical experts."

"What about them?" Jack gestured to the other so-called technical experts already sitting in the room. The senior-level engineers in question shifted uncomfortably.

"I'm sorry, but we really can't start without Graham." That was the vice president of engineering. One of them, anyway.

"We're here to provide team-specific information on the more localized details, but Will's really the best qualified to talk about the technical aspects and repercussions of what you want us to do." That was another vice president, but for a different branch of engineering. Hannibal never really understood the desire for every corporate rank to start with *vice president*.

"And even then, he's not someone you'd want to leave out of this discussion." That was the team lead for the group responsible for phone hardware design, not to be confused with the team leads responsible for the phone software, operating systems, or half a dozen other groups that all somehow demanded to have a say in these proceedings.

"Is he really that much more qualified than the rest of you?" one of Jack's fellow FBI suits asked impatiently.

The oldest engineer in the room sighed, and rubbed his glasses. "Let's put it this way. When we said he's valued and knowledgeable, what we mean is, even Jeff Dean and Steve Wozniak [1] struggle to keep up with him sometimes."

There was a quick scuffle as most of the FBI team tried to act like they knew who either of those people were. At this point Hannibal's mental image of this so-called Will Graham, a worker so skilled that even a room full of government agents and high-ranking executives

were forced to dance to his schedule, coalesced into that of a severe, balding, middle-aged old-timer. The type of pioneer that had been around since the days of punch cards [2], that built the entire infrastructure on which much of the entire nation's productivity and economy now sat.

"I thought this meeting was meant to determine if this company was even willing to cooperate with a federal investigation," said Jack. "The technicals can wait."

"The *technicals* determine whether or not this company is willing to cooperate." The entire room turned to the door. Hannibal turned with them.

He didn't quite remember much of his train of thought after that.

For one, Will Graham was unusually young. Not a fresh-faced graduate, obviously, but he was clearly much younger than the other experts in the room. With his delicate features and big blue doe eyes, he *could* probably pass for a fresh-faced graduate if he ever decided to shave his beard. Which, Hannibal supposed, was there for a reason. Disguising himself as someone older and more authoritative, perhaps, so he could be taken seriously among older coworkers, though even his careful attempts to cover up his *striking* features couldn't stop them from shining through.

But for another, and this was the more important point, Hannibal recognized him as the man in the coffee shop from a few months prior.

Hannibal didn't believe in god or fate, but he definitely believed in taking his chances when he got them.

"Thank you, Will," said one of the lawyers. He turned back to Jack. "Agent Crawford, Will Graham. Will, Jack Crawford. Our company is happy to assist the federal government, but not at the expense of the rest of our users."

"We would greatly appreciate your help in unlocking this phone, yes."

"If you want to unlock one phone, just get an independent hacker to guess the password for that one device. You don't need our entire company," Will pointed out. "You already know what happened with the phone from that incident with the terrorists. If none of your in-house consultants can figure it out, there are surely third party services that would be far cheaper and more convenient than trying to set up a meeting with dozens of extremely busy lawyers, executives, and team leads on the other side of the country. The FBI is just looking for another excuse to plant backdoors in our software, et cetera et cetera."

One of the lawyers winced. "Will – "

"I'm not wrong."

"We just want to unlock this one phone," Jack insisted. "I don't understand why we can't both trust each other to cooperate on this."

Will glared at him, then lifted an eyebrow. "Either you don't know how our company encrypts our phones, in which case you're wasting our time, or you do, in which case you are here under false pretenses, and wasting our time."

"Now, Will, you promised to play nice this time," a different executive said. To an average outsider his tone might have seemed disapproving, but Hannibal was by no means average.

This time. They had planned this general script, most likely. Clearly they had at least done this bad-cop good-cop routine before, against the FBI no less, Hannibal noted with some irony. Let the practiced career corporates do the placating, while the technical leads and engineers ran interference. By dint of his job title in the company, this Will character would be more likely to get away with such blunt behavior than the others.

Hannibal understood the general consensus around people in such roles all too well. Public perception expected a certain purity of truth from so-called technical experts. The honest but naïve, brilliant but with little care for how that information was delivered, constantly butting heads against figures of authority who would prefer power over knowledge. It drew to mind, in the public consciousness, Frances Oldham Kelsey bravely defending American babies against Grunenthal, Valery Legasov standing bravely before the might of the Soviet bureaucracy [3]. Hannibal himself had been in a similar position, when he was still a surgeon. Hospital directors would play politics among themselves, while the racoon-eyed frontliner off an eighteen hour emergency room shift begged "We need more blood bags, *now*."

"I explained this to the last batch of you guys who came in here and last I checked the underlying fundamental principles haven't changed a whit. You think that you can walk in here and ask us to unlock one phone, just like how you can walk into a bank and ask for them to unlock one private lockbox. But this isn't a bank. These phones are locked because of numbers and electricity. You're not asking us for a private key to a lockbox. You're asking us to give you a photograph of a skeleton key to every single lockbox in the bank, so you can make your own skeleton key, and then leave it lying around for every other thief and hacker to copy. Or, even worse, you're asking us to *completely redesign the way locks work* so that you can break into them whenever you want without our permission, because our current locking mechanisms are too strong."

"I thought each phone had a unique personal key as well," one of the technical experts on the FBI side said.

"They do. Each phone has multiple unique keys for encryption, identity verification, and data integrity. You need multiple layers of these keys to break into our phones. And guess what? We don't know the phone-specific keys because we deliberately designed them so we do not have to store this information directly."

"If you don't store the information then how do you know it's the right key?" a bureaucrat on Jack's team interjected, and Hannibal could see all of the engineering consultants, even those on the FBI's side, cover their faces with their palms. Clearly, someone hadn't done their homework. Jack looked a little annoyed, too. Hannibal doubted Jack understood the specifics, either, but at least he had the sense to keep quiet about it. [4]

"There are mathematical principles that allow us to verify that an input is correct without having to directly compare for equality. And before you ask why that is how we do things, that is how *everyone* does things. It's the safest way. It's the reason why any proper website will force you to reset your password instead of emailing it to you. I can give you a more in-depth lecture later, but the point is, you are asking us to either violate fundamental principles of mathematics, or introduce bad software that would break every single phone we've put out, not just this one. I've said this before, and I'll say it again: it would be easier if you just guessed the password."

"People are dying!" That was Jack, again.

"And it is a great tragedy, but not one we can control. Our phones have billions of active users all around the world. Some of them are important people: politicians, military officers, social activists. I guarantee you these people can cause more deaths in a single day through carelessness, than your worst killer over their entire lifetime. You would be putting these people at risk, either to catch *one* guy as you claim, or to gain surveillance power over millions more innocent people." Will rolled his eyes. "The world does not revolve around the FBI, Agent Crawford, much less your one department."

Hannibal's gradually growing interest spiked into utter delight.

"So what I'm hearing is, you don't care that there is a serial killer out there who will keep killing innocent people, and you won't help us save lives," Jack growled. Ah, yes, the old saving lives argument. Uncle Jack certainly knew how to bring out the guilt tripping.

Before Hannibal could even contemplate Will Graham's response, the man shot back, "Not my circus, not my monkeys. FBI work is *your* job. Don't lay this at our feet and call it our fault just because *you* were unable to find any other physical evidence."

Alana's mouth dropped open at his callousness. Even Jack looked somewhat horrified, as did the rest of the FBI team. But judging from the absolute lack of a reaction to Will Graham's words from the company representatives, it seemed that they shared his opinion, and would thus protect his abrasive dogma even as they pretended to object. Not a single shocked face on the other side of the table. Had a suspect on the other side of the interrogation table said such things, they would have immediately raised flags as a psychopath. Hannibal supposed that it still applied here, but because these people were wealthy, respected community members, stalwart leaders of industry, they escaped the consequences. Hannibal couldn't blame them. He, too, hid behind a similar veil to avoid the judgment of society.

It made sense. After all, the purposes of these men and women were to rake in profits, not concern themselves with things that were outside of their jurisdiction. It was a very logical and robotic way to say "not my problem". Of course, part of it was a fundamental difference in values (these arguments about individual privacy rights and national security appeared in news debates between computer experts and government representatives all the time), but clearly just as much of it was protection of private interests by the company.

Hannibal doubted that too many of the executives were *really* so stone-hearted as to not truly not care. Most of them probably "didn't care" about lives in the abstract way most inhabitants of first-world countries did not care about warlords in the Congo. They probably did care

about victims of serial killers if introduced to them personally. They would be horrified, naturally. They were just good at pretending not to care, so that they could avoid the problems that came with being seen publicly submitting to the FBI and no doubt annoying their customers. Numbers and profits above all else.

Will Graham, however…Hannibal detected a harsher undercurrent of *satisfaction* to his words that suggested he wasn't simply acting, not in the way the others were.

"What Will means, is that our company is willing to help in any reasonable manner, but our assistance should not be taken as accepting responsibility," one of the corporate lawyers said blandly, and the entire room sensed the absolute lack of substance in the empty promise.

Jack slammed a hand against the table. "Half a dozen people have been *murdered* so far, and more to come if he gets let back out! It doesn't bother you?"

The executives all stared back with empty, placating smiles, like a row of out-of-service ATMs.

"Behold, the field in which I grow my fucks," said Will. "Lay thine eyes upon it, and thou shalt see that it is barren." [5]

At this point the lawyers on both teams launched into a massive argument on the legal abilities of the federal government to force compliance. Alana shot Hannibal a look. They were here as consultants on the suspect's profile, prepared to discuss the killer's patterns and likelihood that enough important information was on the phone in the first place. What was happening now was far beyond either of their areas of expertise. Hannibal suspected that neither of them would be very helpful for the remainder of this discussion.

Nonetheless, it was quite interesting, watching Jack Crawford be put in his place for the first time since Hannibal had met him. Crawford had the tendency to bully his way through and over everyone he deemed an obstacle, to the point where even his superiors in the FBI tended to turn a blind eye to his antics to avoid having to deal with him. As a result, Crawford often got free reign over most of his investigations – even a major scandal such as the Miriam Lass incident had only gotten him reprimanded and not fired.

But Will Graham seemed capable of resisting every bit of pressure Crawford was throwing at him. Hannibal had always thought that the only thing that would stop someone as bullheaded as Crawford was an even bigger, more bullheaded version of him, but that was not the case with Will Graham. His style of attack was far more reserved and quiet. One would expect someone with such an aversion to eye contact to be completely steamrolled by Crawford, but instead, everything the FBI threw at Will seemed to have the effect of charging a pool of water.

Curiouser and curiouser.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies for what are definitely inaccuracies in how a high-level negotiation between the FBI and a major company would play out. In real life saying such things would definitely be a PR nightmare and a lawsuit waiting to happen, but. Rule of Snarkiest Dialogue won out.

[1] Behind every great leader there's usually a guy that did the hard work to make the dreams happen. General Belisarius to Emperor Justinian, or Nikola Tesla to Edison. Dean and Wozniak were this for Google and Apple. Here's a good article of how unique and important these types of "thinking implementers" are. [↑]

[2] Before people coded via typing, machines read these slips with holes punched into them to represent 1s and 0s. If someone was around when punch cards were being used, you know they were one of the OG programmers. The giants on whose shoulders all the major tech companies now stand, basically. [↑]

[3] Frances Oldham Kelly prevented the FDA from approving Thalidomide for use in the US (even though it had already been approved in much of Europe and Canada) despite pressure from pharmaceutical company Grunenthal. Her misgivings about the drug ended up being right; Thalidomide was marketed as a "perfectly safe" treatment for morning sickness for pregnant women yet caused limb loss and physical defects in the fetus. In a similar vein, Valery Legasov was a Soviet scientist and chief of the commission investigating the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. He did his best to inform people of the truth of all the dangers despite the Soviet government trying to coverup/downplay the situation. [↑]

[4] No proper company ever stores passwords for safety reasons. I won't go into too much detail, but there are certain special math operations that can be done quickly one way but are hard to do in reverse. These are the fundamental building blocks that keep your accounts, money, and phones secure. No one expects the average person to know about them, but the FBI guy should have been briefed before walking into the room because it's some really basic stuff. Imagine going to Singapore to sell gum without bothering to learn their laws. A video on the basics if you're interested. [↑]

[5] This came from the Bayeux Tapestry memes, but I'm pretending that those don't exist here and that Will came up with that all on his own. I think it's especially fitting because the historical Bayeux Tapestry was woven to commemorate none other than William the Conqueror and the Norman invasion of England in 1066. [↑]

Central Processing Unit

Chapter Summary

> In which Will has friends who are normal average human beings that actually exist, and Hannibal is himself.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

> "Dear lord, Graham," Prajit wheezed, "how on earth do you come up with the things you do?"
>
> Will grimaced in what he hoped would pass for a smile. "I don't know. I just…let myself go, and whatever comes out of my mouth comes out." He was still fixating on Hugo comparing him to Jeff Dean and Steve Wozniak, of all people. It wasn't that he didn't appreciate it, because there were far worse people to have parallel comparisons drawn to, but it was inaccurate. Will never felt as if he was naturally gifted with numbers in the way those two incredible men were, or even the way many of his coworkers were.
>
> In terms of technical ability, he was objectively in the middle of the pack. Well, he was better than the general public, obviously. Actually, he was above average compared to everyone in the field as a whole. But among the group of engineers already considered "cream of the crop" – the ones that attended the top universities and went to work for the best companies – he wasn't as standout as he seemed to be.
>
> In college, people had hailed him as one of "those" geniuses, "that one kid" who managed to score top of the class on every test even while everyone else clung on for dear life, dependent on a curve that placed a 40% as a passing grade. Everyone assumed he had some sort of natural talent, but the reality (apart from the whole eidetic memory thing) was a lot more boring: he just worked harder than everyone else. Not because he was inherently a hard worker, either, but because he simply never had to take breaks from studying or coding like a normal person should. And none of *that* had anything superhuman about it, either. Will didn't have to take breaks because all of this *was* his break. He got the same relaxation out of coding that other people got from spending time with their family, or playing sports, or video gaming. Compared to what his life used to be before, Will had basically been on vacation for over a decade.
>
> Nonetheless, all of his peers seemed to think that he had that extra, special little "spark" that those 0.1-percentile performers all shared, because hard work alone couldn't explain his talent at digging through the most obscure systems. And Will never bothered to correct them. Better to let them think that he was like Jeff Dean and Steve Wozniak and those "special people"

who could magically think like machines at the bit level, than to reveal the truth: that Will did not understand the systems, but the *people* behind them.

Machines didn't build themselves, after all. Behind any giant mass of poorly commented source code and change histories, some tired or careless engineer was bound to slip up sooner or later. And as long as Will could reconstruct their mindsets, he could figure out the design paths their logic took when implementing a particular idea.

So it wasn't that Dean or Wozniak couldn't keep up with him. They just weren't as fast as Will when it came to reliably guessing the what sorts of mistakes might crop up in a system and where. And that in and of itself wasn't a reliable indicator of talent. Both of those famous names were more involved in development, *creation* – Will, on the other hand, was a security engineer, so it was his *job* to test things. They debugged their own projects, but it was a waste of their talents and resources to send them after other projects outside of their purview, combing for bugs. Bugs which appeared when intentions and reality disconnected by accident. Troublesome but harmless. Well, depending on where the mistakes were, anyway. Mistakes in extremely sensitive systems were often far from harmless. Will meant harmless compared to –

```
os.flush()
```
[1]

No, bad. Stop. Erase it, clear it, encrypt it and stick it in an inaccessible location that no pointer could ever jump to [2]. Will had spent the last two decades building the system partitions [3] in his mind. A precise structure, everything in its right place, accurately organized in relation to everything else. Such better barriers than mere forts. Out of both gratefulness and effectiveness, Will had modeled the inside of his brain after the beloved machines that had saved him from himself. He did not need a palace for his memory. This was better.

The rules of morality could be bent and argued over by public opinion, could be warped through debate and manipulation. But logic was hard and reliable. You could not dispute the truth when it came to mathematics. Learning that instead of having to feel his way through the murkiness of right and wrong, he could just take the logical decision, had been the greatest revelation of his life thus far. With logic, he never had to worry about whether he was reflecting his own thoughts or those of someone else, whether he genuinely agreed or was just being led around again. Logic was itself. Either you had the correct answer or you didn't. Some problems were unsolvable, but then that too had a correct answer: that the problem was unsolvable. If it was logical, then it didn't matter if someone else came up with that answer because Will knew he would have safely agreed anyway. If it was incorrect, it could be easily proven to be so. And if anyone asked Will about morality, he could just ask right back, "By whose heuristics should I base my decision on?" and leave them to consider the implications of a devout 15th-century Catholic being transported forward in time to meet a radical liberal atheist. Logic was the rule, and morality merely a metric.

The point was, what this all translated into when he graduated and got a job, was him being the sort of highly focused employee willing to work more hours. The sort that managers salivated over and developers pretended to be on social media (there was an odd brand of masochism in the industry as young men and women competed to see who got the hardest

bugs and least sleep and worst work-life balance). Behavior that would be considered unhealthy anywhere else, worn as a badge of pride in this unique little subculture whose native patterns by sheer luck happened to match his abnormal coloration. A place that he had slipped into, unnoticed, and been welcomed with open arms all the same, allowed to blend in with their natural environment.

Perhaps that was why computer science was such a beneficial field for him. Instead of an freezing lake, a computer was like…walking onto a giant glass mirror. Will looked down, and saw nothing but himself. To be the reflected, rather than the reflecter, for once. He couldn't easily think like a machine, couldn't dive beneath the surface and drown like he did with people. Something that he struggled to understand kept his mind busy and off…*other* topics. It was something he had to work at, and Will was, if anything, a hard worker. He didn't mind the intricate monotony; lord knew he had dealt with far worse drudgery as a child. And, unlike in his childhood, this paid far better.

And if the *badbadbad* thoughts ever got *too* overwhelming, he had plenty of material to wash them away. A corporation as large as this, with thousands of engineers, over so many years of building complex systems, meant billions of lines of code. More than enough brain-melting drudgery to last him until the heat death of the universe. A psychologist would probably say that procrastinating instead of addressing a problem at its core was a bad idea. But Will, being Will, merely did the calculations and realized that the problem would never appear as long as he could push it beyond the end of his finite lifespan.

"I wish I could get away with saying that kind of thing. I don't know how you pull it off, because if anyone that wasn't you said that, they'd be canned in seconds."

Will laughed uncomfortably. "Yay me."

"Behold my field of fucks – what was it you said? Behold my barren field of fucks…I still can't believe you said that to the FBI! The *flipping* FBI! Where did you even get that from?" Henry snorted.

"I…I don't know. I just felt like saying it, I suppose." Will was telling the truth here; he genuinely had no idea where he got that from.

"You're a regular Shakespeare, you know that? A real modern classic."

"If this wasn't a classified meeting I'd put this on the company Myths and Legends page. Never change, Will, never change." Teodor scratched his ear. "Actually, you know, I might just do it anyway. If I take out all the names and the context the lawyers won't complain."

Will gave a wince that, because of the way his face was shaped, ended up looking like a conspiratorial grin instead. "How long do I have until this ends up on the internal meme site?"

"How dare you suggest that a distinguished, middle-aged, high-ranking employee such as myself regularly trawls the meme page?" Prajit interjected, and the others all howled with laughter. Will wasn't the most updated on meme culture himself, but he knew enough. Specifically, that Prajit used his regular involvement in organizing orientations for interns and

new employees as an excuse to require "cultural and generational research for keeping our company relevant with potential recruits".

"Speaking of which, I'm going to see about getting you a bonus."

"If I go back there and tell them to fuck off, do I get a bonus too?"

"Shut up, no you don't. The bonus wasn't for mouthing off, it was for finding that other zero-day [4] from last week. They didn't get around to confirming the exploit worked until today because of the backlog, but they did push yours up the queue because it was so important."

"Think we'll get in trouble with the feds now?"

"That Crawford guy looked pretty pissed off."

"Yeah, well, they can't get us on anything and they know it. Come on. They have no legal grounds to stand on whatsoever, right Craig?"

"I can't comment on any ongoing legal proceedings," Craig smiled, tapping the side of his nose. "But I will say there's no point in requesting information from us that has been specifically designed to be technically and mathematically impossible to retrieve."

"Seriously, your rant was beautiful. A real work of art. I mean, I was expecting you to insult them a little bit, y'know? Put them in their place like you did to that jackass investor who liked to pretend he knew more about tech than *us*. Will, you tore them a new one. You murdered them and brought them back to life and murdered them again."

Will internally winced and hoped no one noticed his reaction. No one did, of course. They were all too busy congratulating themselves at having successfully defended the castle of private industry and individual liberty against another siege from the pesky federal government. Nearly every Silicon Valley computer techie he knew oscillated between this sort of ultra-libertarian don't-tread-on-me 100%-free-unregulated internet principle and hyper-left wing social idealism depending on the time of day.

"I do feel a little bad for those poor girls, though," Teodor said.

Will's stomach did a little flip. He thought he had left those days behind him, buried in the swamps of Louisiana. "Yeah. That was. Bad."

"You know what the case is about?"

"No, not really," Will interjected quickly, before they could go further down that rabbit hole. "Let's not talk about it here, all right? Not exactly a work appropriate discussion."

Sam immediately backpedaled, somehow afraid that *he* was the one more socially awkward and unacceptable than Will. Will, who during his time here, had somehow managed to become known as the standard of dignity and virtue, just because he had a reputation for being that one guy who was never afraid of standing up to management or his own friends or the fucking FBI when he thought they were compromising their principles. Somehow, his callous disregard for social niceties that slipped out in times of stress had become something

to be lauded. "Oh no, of course not. That was totally not what I meant. It's horrible, of course. Terrible. I didn't mean to – yeah, that was inappropriate."

Huang loudly tossed the sheaf of briefing papers into the shredder. "Of course it's terrible, but it literally has nothing to do with us. The nerve of that FBI guy, trying to guilt trip and pin the responsibility on our company, of all things. As if it was *our* fault some crazy person went around killing people. Like the fact that we *weren't* willing to bend over backwards for them, and weaken our entire security infrastructure just for literally ONE man, made us somehow complicit."

"Right? Just take a second to think about how unacceptable that kind of blame deflection would be in any other situation. Imagine if, instead of the FBI and a private sector company, it was a husband and wife. Guarantee you everyone would be yelling gaslighting and domestic abuse."

"Oh, no question! That was way out of line. I can't believe he would even try something like that."

"I still can't believe he was allowed to say, and this is a direct quote, 'you'll spend the rest of your lives knowing you could have done something, but didn't.' Like, what the hell, man? This isn't, you know, us standing up against Nazi Germany."

"Arguably, this *is* a bit like us standing up against Nazi Germany...we just disagree on who Hitler is here."

"Whoa there, Charlie. I know we didn't like them, but don't you think it's a bit of a stretch to compare the FBI to Hitler?"

"You'd think it was normal, considering how both of my teenage kids go on. Eff the police, Black Lives Matter, or something like that? What sort of social justice do the kids these days care about?"

"Here now, you're not even black!"

"I mean, *Homo sapiens* came out of Africa, so we're all at least 0.0000000001% black – "

"Oh, not this again. Frank, you can't just *say* stuff like that."

"We're not in *public*, I'm just making a private joke among friends."

"If an exec makes a slightly off-colour joke in a forest and no one is there to hear it, is it still against company non-discriminatory policy?"

"Gee, I don't know, is it racist to say 'F the police, Black Lives Matter' to a law enforcement officer who is also black?"

"Racist or not, I feel sorry for whoever has to work under that prick. Will was right in telling him to piss off. I only wish I could think of comebacks that fast."

"Out of line, definitely."

"That was so unprofessional of him."

"Yeah, so unprofessional."

Concurring echoes of *yeah, so unprofessional* all around. Will thought that perhaps he should on principle hate the tribalism and groupthink that caused cliques to blindly defend each other, remembering how much suffering it had caused him with every new town and every new school in his youth. Now that it was working in his favor (and had been for the last decade) for once in his life, however, he wasn't about to complain. He'd worked so hard to fit in, dammit, even on the days where he was so tired that he was tempted to give up on the social niceties. Toeing the line of strange enough that he wasn't stretched so exhaustingly far from his true self, but not strange enough to be seen as creepy or unstable.

He deserved this. Having a community around him. Protecting him. Never suspecting once that his "quirkiness" ever extended to beyond what was still conventionally acceptable.

"Don't mind me. Just pretending to be a normal human."

"Haha, same!"

"You've been quiet, Will. What's your say in all of this?"

"I was unprofessional, too," Will pointed out.

"Yes, but it was a *funny* unprofessional. It was a *justified* unprofessional. Don't worry, Will, nothing's going to come of it. Trust me, I've been working in the Valley for decades. They don't fire people like you over crap like this."

"Of course nothing's going to come of it," Teodor snorted. "They didn't fire Mangse for his three-page-long passive-aggressive email to that Secretary of Whatever, and they didn't fire Jean-Paul for taking out the classified bits and circulating the funny quotes internally."

"Besides, didn't the SVP of Eng straight-up *tell* Will to go off on them?"

"Oh yeah, I was there at the pre-meeting briefing. Right, Will?"

Will sighed. "Yeah. Not in so many words, but yeah."

"See, you're fine! Anyway, it's not as if we'd fire you even if you did speak out of line once or twice! You'd have to literally publicly declare yourself a neo-Nazi before they even considered firing you. You're one of our best. Besides, we know you care in reality. All of us were acting in there; classic hardball negotiation, you know? We have to put up a strong front for our customers and shareholders, so they know they can trust us to not let any outward pressure bully us around. It's not as if you're *actually* some callous murdering psychopath on the inside, come on."

Will gulped. "Yeah. Of course."

"You okay, man? You look a bit pale."

"I haven't had lunch yet, and trying to explain to that Crawford guy how basic encryption works drained the rest of my energy." It was the first excuse that came to mind, and in Will's opinion, it wasn't at all convincing, but everyone else seemed to find it hilarious.

"Government workers, am I right?"

"Remember them asking why we don't just store our passwords in plaintext? That other guy didn't even bother to do a little research beforehand."

"And our tax money goes to these idiots. See, this is why I vote libertarian sometimes."

"Ed, the libertarians have nice ideals but they don't ever work in real life…"

"You never know! Besides, this is California so it's not going to make a difference – "

"Can we keep politics out of this? I liked it better when we were just making fun of the feds for being dumb."

"And Will being a total badass. William of House Graham; First of His ID; Lord of Zero Days, Vulnerability Reports, and Passive Aggressive Snarking; Taker of No Shits; Defender of User Privacy; Breaker of Encryption and Father of…uh…Dogs?"

Will lifted one incredulous eyebrow. "How long did you take to come up with that?"

"Just now. You like it?"

"You're ridiculous."

"*You're* ridiculous."

Ed and Nathaniel were still arguing about politics. Will tuned them out and tried to walk faster. Teodor, however, managed to catch up to him. "I have a question. Did they also tell you to walk in a little late on purpose?"

"No, I wasn't lying about having a bunch of back to back meetings beforehand," said Will. "God, I hate them. I hate people. Sometimes I wish they would just disappear – "

Before Will could wince at that last thing that slipped out of his mouth, Rashan interjected, "Ugh, *same*! You're lucky, you know; you're on the security team. You're not being pressured to deliver a client-facing product by some assholes on the marketing team who always over-promise and under-allocate time because don't know how anything works or how long it will take! And look at this monstrosity that's my calendar!" He waved his phone angrily at them, showing a colored grid with a concerningly small amount of empty space. "I haven't had a free day in months. I just want to code again. Properly code. So many projects piling up. These policy consults need to just *die* already!"

"That's what you two get for getting promoted."

Rashan rolled his eyes. "Yeah, yeah, laugh it up."

"Anyway, I'm off. And Will, look out for that bonus. I really wasn't kidding, and the Big C will definitely find it as hilarious as the rest of us did."

"Yeah. Thanks. Listen, uh, I have a project I have to get back to, so I'm just going to – go now," Will finished lamely.

"Understandable. Me too. Some shits from Abe's team pushed a bad change and now they expect *me* to supervise the rollback." Alexei raised his coffee travel mug in a toast and shuffled away.

"Hey, before I forget, can you ping me the design doc for the updated system? No rush."

"Sure." Will glanced around rapidly, trying to look for a quick exit. No one paid him any mind.

"Cool. Are you stopping by the kitchen? I think Gwendolyn managed to steal the good snacks from Building 20."

"I really have to get this thing done," Will muttered, really wanting to recharge after all that human interaction from before completely drained his battery. He waved his hand vaguely. "It's…bad."

"Oh dear, was it that flaky test [5] that the guys in OS were stuck on all of the last two weeks?"

Will had actually figured it out last night, and was planning to just hide in his office all day, but he said, "Yep."

"Those are the *worst*. Want us to get you anything?"

"Nah, I have whiskey in my desk drawer. No, I'm not sharing," he added with a glare.

There was another round of laughter, and as they walked away, Will could hear someone saying, "Classic Graham."

Meanwhile, Hannibal decided to do a bit of snooping on Will Graham. He sent a private thanks to Will and his colleagues for ushering the age of the internet, which allowed him to covertly gather such information from the comforts of his hotel room.

His initial searches were predictably difficult due to how common of a name "Will Graham" was, but Hannibal wouldn't be where he was today by giving up easily and he had certainly hunted more elusive prey before. Through careful curtailing of his queries he was finally able to draw up a Youtube video from a conference where Will had been invited as a speaker. Hannibal assumed that it was one of the larger conferences; the channel name belonged to a verified organization whose other featured speakers also had high view counts for such a niche category, in the six to seven digit range.

Despite having little knowledge of the subject, Hannibal could appreciate a good presentation – if it wasn't clear before, it was certainly clear now that Will was somewhat well-known and well-respected within his circles, and the comments and ratings seemed to agree. Discounting the usual flood of overused jokes and memes that seemed to plague every Youtube comments section, nearly every viewer was praising the ingenuity of the topic or asking more in-depth questions – a request for expertise, rather than a challenge.

From there the Youtube recommendation engine was helpful enough to suggest even more lectures featuring Will Graham – some academic, and some industry – giving Hannibal more of a chance to appreciate his voice, his face, his behavior. The lesser-viewed videos were even more illuminating than the first one. There was a certain dark confidence that emanated from him, and Hannibal couldn't wait to see what made him tick.

"There is beauty, in logic. In truth. In searching for answers, and finding them. Anyone can devise a solution if you hammer at it hard enough – and in many cases, brute force is a valid way to go about things. But every once in awhile you chance upon something so brilliant that there is no other way to describe it than elegant*."*

Should Will Graham ever choose to leave industry and retire to academia, as so many professors of computer science seemed to do, he would be very popular, indeed.

"Imagine you are a hacker. Put yourself into their mind. How would you do it? Where would you start? What is your goal? What do you want? What are your resources? What are you after? What is your motive?" the tinny speakers on the tablet hissed. *"Are you a thief, looking for money? A spy, looking for information? A nation-state, wanting to incite instability within your enemy? Or are you just trying to cause damage? Poke it with a stick, see if it's alive? Are you winding it up and watching it go, just to see what will happen?"*

Hannibal's grin grew wider.

There was some other information available after some more careful investigation. His alma mater, published research papers during his graduate degree and beyond, an impressively high h-index [6] for someone no longer in academia, a resume, a LinkedIn profile, even a few newspaper articles and a Wikipedia entry (though it was very short, just barely rescued from stub status by the record-breaking long list of reported security exploits credited to his name, and did not have a photograph or a section for personal life).

All of them had one thing in common: they were extremely sparse and professional, detailing all his accomplishments but nothing about himself. Nothing regarding his personal life, his place of birth, his childhood, relationships, hobbies, old shames. Not a single hint, not even a speeding ticket on his record. Perhaps there was a short blurb on a nonprofit site for rescuing strays servicing the general area that mentioned *a* William Graham, but Hannibal wasn't even sure if that was the correct one, as no photograph or other identifying information was included.

Almost as if someone had deliberately scrubbed all trace of himself from the world, leaving behind all of the effects of his existence but none of the man.

By the time Hannibal managed to pull himself away from his newly growing interest on Will Graham, it was nearly midnight and he had been on his Googling spree for close to four hours straight. With a sigh, he decided to finally shut his laptop and sleep – though even deciding between that and five more minutes of Will Graham was difficult to make. Perhaps Hannibal should be concerned about what was quickly becoming an obsession, but he didn't care. He never cared.

Ten minutes after Hannibal had settled into bed and closed his eyes, he decided to get up again and spent an extra half-hour searching through professional photos and still images from video presentations (all carefully saved to his memory palace) until he finally found a particularly aesthetically pleasing shot of Will.

It came from another computer security conference presentation (which seemed to be Graham's only reliable public appearances). Same conference as the first video Hannibal had found, but from a different year.

He was wearing a nicer button-down than the generic ones that he and all the other engineers in the private conference with the FBI favored, and his face was tilted in such a way that the stage light hit it pleasantly. The picture quality was exceptional, surprising Hannibal – normally the provided streaming at such events resulted in poor contrast and washed-out features, but here, the play of shadows and stage lighting highlighted his magnificent bone structure and the iridescent warm brown tones of his soft curls beautifully. Behind him was a technology-related stock photo title slide – a bluish-black surface coated in a glowing green diagram of wires and numbers. Illuminated against a dark stage and a dimly lit backdrop, surrounded by the source of his power and expertise, he looked positively radiant.

What a shame that the videographers for the event had not credited themselves; Hannibal would have liked to thank them personally for their services. Hannibal took a quick screenshot, cropped the photo, and uploaded it to Will's Wikipedia page so that it looked less empty and impersonal. Then, after some consideration, he saved the picture to his tablet, impulsively made it his new wallpaper, stared at it for seventeen whole minutes, frowned in concern at himself, and deleted it again.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, Hannibal. You know you've got it bad when you start to edit his *Wikipedia* page.

[1] flush() refers to clearing a buffer – a place where a computer temporarily stores copies of data, usually while it's trying to do something with it. Flushing clears out all the leftover scraps when you're done with them. [↑]

[2] In order to retrieve data from memory computers need something to find the physical location of the electrical charges and send them back to wherever they're needed. It's possible to have empty spaces that are never found, either because the computer never

expected them to be used, or because they were deliberately designed so that no normal process could find them. [↑]

[3] Computers reserve different parts of their memory for different things, like rooms in a house. These partitions will map to physically different locations on the chips where all those 1s and 0s are actually stored (using electrical charges). Basically Will developed his version of a mind palace modeled after how a computer separates data, instead of a house or a stream. [↑]

[4] A zero-day is a completely new security bug that no one has found before, and therefore no defenses exist against it yet. They can be worth millions on the black market. [↑]

[5] A flaky test means that your code sometimes runs correctly, and sometimes doesn't. This is worse than code that always runs incorrectly, because it means that the problem goes way deeper than just "wrong code" – there is something random or unpredictable that is affecting your program beyond just what you wrote. [↑]

[6] h-index: a metric measuring the impact of someone's impact concerning published papers. The more papers you publish, and the more people cite your papers, the higher the h-index. [↑]

Random Access Memory

Chapter Summary

The beginnings of Will's person suit, and the start of the end for Hannibal's.

Chapter Notes

Like a reviewer mentioned last chapter, Will's coworkers see him as a less intimidating, shyer version of Gilfoyle from Silicon Valley. (The character is exaggerated for comedic effect, but there's always a bearded, bespectacled, monotone guy like this on every team and no one cares.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

12 Years Ago

"Can you tell us what happened?"

Will carefully considered his next words. "I don't know, I was just walking to class and then some guy ran up to that lady and started screaming at her. And she screamed at him to get back, she had a restraining order. And then he stabbed her."

He didn't mention that from the exchange, he had also gleaned that *he was an alcoholic* and *abusive ex-husband please bitch deserved it that'll teach her to try to run from ME* and *bitch thinks she can escape just by getting some pretty words on a pretty piece of paper to say she's smart she'll come crawling back when she needs the money they all do –*

No. Bad. Keep it simple, stupid. Say what everyone else would have said.

"Do you know who either party was?"

"Um, no. No, not really. I don't think we're in the same department. And I didn't get a clear look at the lady's face but the guy looked too old to be a student. Um, I mean undergraduate student. I mean it's possible because there's this 70-year-old guy going to college for the first time in my physics lecture, but. I don't think a guy who goes around stabbing people like that goes to school, you know?"

"How about the lady? Can you tell us anything about her?"

"No, um, she was facing away from me, and then she fell to the ground. I don't have any medical training and I was afraid to get any closer and contaminate the scene. And I don't

have a phone, but someone else was already calling 911. So I just…kinda stood there."

"It's all right, son. You did the right thing, not getting closer. Without medical training, you could have made things worse."

"Um, is the lady okay? Did they get her to the hospital in time?" Will injected some hopefulness into his voice, but it was all fake. He'd known, from the moment he saw that stab, that it had been fatal.

"Unfortunately, we can't give out any more details. However, your school has informed us that they are requiring mental health services for everyone in the area for the incident. These sessions will be completely free." The officer fumbled with some papers. "Here's your appointment slip. If you have a scheduling conflict, you can call the number on the paper."

Will stared at it like it was a venomous snake. "Is this mandatory?"

"Yes, but as we mentioned, it's free. It's just a thirty-minute counseling session to make sure you weren't negatively impacted by the incident, and if you feel like you need subsequent sessions, you can get up to six for free, as a student. Don't worry about it, son. This is all just a formality so the university can't get sued for…whatever."

Will sighed. He had hoped to avoid this – he hadn't been back to a psychologist for years now. But here he was, being forced to see someone for some stupid reason. All because he had the bad luck to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, and some crazy abusive ex-husband who couldn't just let things go. Open and shut case; the majority of the witnesses including Will hadn't even needed to see the inside of the courtroom. The perpetrator had been caught laughably quickly, but there was nothing to be done for all the blood staining the sidewalk, even after weeks of janitors with pressurized powerwashing hoses.

So there he was, in a dingy little office provided by the university's free on-campus services, and oh did the folding chairs and threadbare carpets reflect that matter. Will supposed that he shouldn't be judging poor quality and a lack of money, even if he suspected that the institution could definitely buy far better chairs. He sat there, knowing that his current strategy of looking at the ground and not making eye contact as per usual was bound to draw unwanted scrutiny from…*Clara* (who was just a therapist and not a doctor and so could not prescribe medication), yet unable to bring himself to behave any differently.

He could see her judgment as her eyes raked over his threadbare clothes and patchy scruff that he'd started to grow since it started coming in during high school so that he'd look older and less vulnerable. "William…Graham?"

"Yeah. Uh. Will's fine."

"Thank you. And your department?"

"Compsci," Will mumbled.

"I'm sorry?"

"Computer science."

And just like that, a switch was flipped. She went from wary and concerned to a mixture of understanding, resigned, accepting, and dismissive. Will wouldn't have believed someone could cycle through that so fast if he hadn't just seen it for himself. "Oh, I see!" she said, then added belatedly, "That's a good field," in a tone that suggested she said that to every student, even the ones majoring in underwater basket weaving. "You should make sure to hang out with other majors too, to have a more well-rounded social circle."

"Yeah."

After a few more perfunctory questions, she announced merrily, "Well, that's it for today, and you're always welcome back here if you have any other concerns." And with that she had shuffled him out the door, without having mentioned (or even thought about, Will supposed) his empathy once.

Will could still remember his own shock. *That's it? Nothing else? Are you sure you don't really want to study my empathy, the autism spectrum, warning signs of psychopathy?* No, she hadn't even cared. She just assumed that she was the sort of shy, withdrawn future engineer who preferred programming to people.

Which was technically true, though not for the reason other shy, withdrawn future engineers majored in computer science. He had been drawn to math and machines because he thought it would help him discipline his mind better than letting it run wild with killers, and also because his father thought it paid more than forensics and criminal justice. But until now, Will hadn't realized the additional bonus of extent to which it would shield him. Surely, Will thought, had he been surrounded by psychologists and psychiatrists who specialized in criminal minds, he would have immediately raised numerous red flags.

Instead, his supposedly problematic behavior had been dismissed as standard, acceptable quirks that everyone in STEM was stereotyped to have. They had shoved him into a labeled box along with all the others, only instead of some petri dish for the mentally deranged, it was just lost-and-found holding a bunch of awkward nerds of varying degrees of harmlessness. Literally one word, one alternate classification, and suddenly everyone's faces around him resolved into little *ohhhs* of "Never mind, he's normal and safe! He's just one of *them*." Even at career fairs, where higher levels of professionality, decorum, and social behavior were expected, Will seemed to get more of a pass than he had before. Somehow, by sheer luck, he had stumbled into the exact environment that perfectly camouflaged his natural colours. Like an albino deer that spent its whole life being an easy target for predators, only to find snow on its first trip out of the forest.

The next time Will went to his lectures, he looked out over the sea of heads before him. Predominantly young, white, East Asian, or Indian men in glasses and overly casual clothes and various stages of unshavenness. In this, Will was actually a standout, being of a reasonable standard of fitness and hygiene. Significantly above average, compared to the rest of his department. He was no athlete, but at the very least he was used to physical exertion and manual labor from his childhood.

Also, and here was the kicker – he showered regularly, a habit from his days when his sweaty nightmares were more of a problem than they were now. For some reason, that was considered something worthy of applause here.

I guess if you lower the standards enough, even the most basic of personal care tasks become legendary.

It wasn't a matter of machines being a fort for his mind anymore. It was his free train ticket to actual, honest-to-goodness, *integration*. It was his disguise, a person suit that actually fit him snugly for once. Like it had been custom tailored for him. Will felt like a pile of nuts and bolts, wrapped in human skin, somehow passing the Turing Test [1] day by day and slowly getting better at it despite neither him nor his creators having any clue what he was doing.

One of us! One of us! Gooble gobble one of us! We accept him, one of us!

Will never thought he would fall in love with the idea of a technical interview as much as he had. None of the societal hoops of *what's your greatest weakness, is his handshake firm* that he would normally have to jump through to pass as a human being. No psychological evaluations, no silent judgments on eye contact and posture and attire. His interviewer had rolled up in jeans and sneakers and a t-shirt [2]; he was asked to solve a bunch of problems about math and algorithms and the like; and his worth was valued only based on how correct his answers were and not if he was "friendly enough to be a good fit for the company".

Will could do correct answers, easy. He had been in the business of truth since he was a child, uncomfortable or not. And coding problems were the most comfortable type of truth, nothing to it. He had, somehow unwittingly, walked into a world that did its damned best to be run by logic and actively applauded individuals that did the same, even if it did not always perfectly succeed. There was always going to be office politics, but as the years went by, Will found it was bothering him less and less.

He had friends. Will wasn't sure if he was a very good friend in return, but he had friends. People actually liked and respected him. People who were willing to vouch for him and his character. Who would indulge – no, not indulge, *accept* – his tendencies. Actually, not even that. They *expected* that behavior from him and were genuinely fine with it. It wasn't something they put up with for the sake of extracting usefulness from him; they genuinely didn't care. To his colleagues a programmer being slightly weird was a fact of life. *The sky was blue, grass was green, and Will Graham's gone into his little headspace and stopped talking to people again, what else is new? No, nothing's wrong. He's probably just hard at work again. Debugging compilers is tough shit, so I don't blame him. I mean, we have guys who talk to rubber ducks* [3]*, so who cares if Graham mutters to himself?*

And he could stand their company. He still wasn't very comfortable with people, but having the topic of computers to stand in as a proxy for actual social bonding did help. And if he felt overwhelmed and did not want to interact, no one was curious about *what does this mean, is he fragile, is he unstable?*

He did not have to be unfriendly and miserable to get people to leave him alone. He did not have to defend his forts with arrows and boiling oil, to prevent people from getting in. All he

had to do was act shy and awkward, like literally all the other guys there, and people just backed off as soon as they asked, "How's the scrum [4] coming along?" Being known as the smart kid at college, and later the smart guy in the office, there was always someone trying to borrow his unique line of thinking for homework help or debugging, but Will didn't mind this so much. When he looked here, it didn't hurt, and it didn't give fuel to the nightmares. He looked into the void, and only himself stared back. It was a pleasurable sort of emptiness. Maybe a bit of annoyance sometimes, when he found someone else's particularly shitty code, but you weren't a real programmer until you complained about the guy that came before you, and there was an odd catharsis in bitching about other people's stupidity. That, Will could talk about with others just fine, and have fun doing it.

Him, Will Graham, making conversation with *other people* by *choice*. His father would be so proud. Him, Will Graham, actually having people *like* him instead of simply putting up with him. They liked him, and he found himself liking them back. He still preferred his solitude, and being around too many people could still overload his senses, but overall, it wasn't really that bad. In another life, he might have given up on going through the motions of social niceties if it became apparent that he was never going to truly fit in anyway. But here, the fact that *fitting in* was well within his reach, made the small extra effort worth it.

The darkness in his dreams didn't stop, but they did get easier.

Present Day

The FBI team had quickly dismissed Hannibal, Alana, and the other consultants once it was clear that their services would not be helpful here, so whatever other arguments Will Graham would give were lost to him. Hannibal personally did not care whether or not Jack succeeded in unlocking the phone, except as a passing curiosity, but he did begin to regret for the first time his selection when he was still choosing which city to settle in.

Baltimore had its charm, not to mention its proximity to a high concentration of wealth and power, but seeing the same people year after year was starting to wear him down. He hadn't realized the extent to which his inspiration had suffered, until he met Will Graham.

Here was something new for him to sink his teeth into. Whether figuratively or literally was left to be seen. Computers lacked to emotional impact of the Renaissance masters, to be sure, but Hannibal appreciated beauty in all its forms, and he understood the elegance of a particularly well designed work.

Too soon, the trip was over, and they were forced to return to Baltimore. But he was not deterred. If he would see Will Graham again, then he would. Hannibal had managed to stay for an extra few days past, under the pretext of reconnecting with old colleagues at Stanford University. This was technically not a lie; it was just that the act of reconnecting with old colleagues at Stanford University itself had underlying purposes other than idle chit-chat.

That became apparent soon enough, when a few months later an email arrived in his inbox informing him of his manipulations bearing fruit.

"You're leaving? Really? I didn't realize the Bay Area appealed to you that much when we last dropped by," Alana said.

"Not so much the city itself, though the weather is quite pleasant," Hannibal said. While there were many things that annoyed him about California, Hannibal could at least appreciate the mild climate. Baltimore was nowhere near as cold as those bitter winters of Eastern Europe, but snow along the California coastline was basically nonexistent. "I simply wished for a change in scenery, and this option for a return to teaching and a move to newer pastures came at precisely the right moment." Being well-known in the medical and psychiatric communities, as well as having stellar references from his previous time at Johns Hopkins, had practically made him a shoo-in candidate.

"Johns Hopkins didn't have any open positions? I'd have thought they'd be jumping to give you your old spot back. You were quite popular when you were there." Alana's cheeks were slightly pink. Hannibal smiled. She would know about that quite well, wouldn't she?

"Only for limited part-time lectures. If I am to return to academia I would prefer to have the safety of a full-time position, with more freedom to set my own schedule and pacing. Stanford also offered a joint position as a liaison between their campus and their medical school." Of course, Hannibal could have gotten a position of similar ranking and benefits from Johns Hopkins if he tried. But where would the fun in that be? "The hiring deans at our alma mater had not expected me to return anytime soon, given the success of my private practice. All their main positions had already been filled by the time I made my availability known, and it surely would not be fair to renege on those contracts for my sake."

"Still, this seems all so sudden," Alana said, her disappointment clearly visible. "Will you come back to visit, at least?"

"I won't be moving until summer of next year," Hannibal told her as kindly as he was able. "There are still many administrative things to sort out. I should have time for a few more dinner parties, if you are willing to come. And of course I will keep in touch. This is the twenty-first century, after all."

With his teaching contract secured, Hannibal set about finding a new home.

Moving across the country did come with logistics issues of its own. For one, it was much harder to find constructions with basements on the California coastline – even without earthquake risk, the mild weather meant no frost line, and therefore no incentive for builders to spend extra money digging a deeper foundation. Certainly, Hannibal did not intend to sell his Baltimore house with its soundproofed, poured concrete basement, even if he intended to thoroughly clean it of any evidence before leaving.

He also debated whether or not to permanently retire the Chesapeake Ripper. If he intended to continue hunting, he could not use the same style, at least not in California. His distinctive art displays moving from one side of the country to another shortly after he had done the same was too obvious even for someone as blind as Jack Crawford. Still, Hannibal tried to consider the merits of having the threat of the Chesapeake Ripper remain.

The last time he had been inspired enough to make his displays had been years ago. If he moved now, that would have been enough of a stagger in timing to make it look like his movements did not coincide with the Ripper's. On the other hand, his Ripper displays were traditionally spaced over a year apart on average. It would be possible to secretly return to Baltimore once every few years or so, set up a Ripper murder to make it look like the Ripper was still active in the region, and thus allow his move to California to further cover his tracks. Of course, such an undertaking would be time-consuming and dangerous in its own way, and it would require traveling the distance of the nation without being caught. That meant either repeatedly going through disguises and hoping that his fake IDs held up against airport security, or somehow figuring out an alibi that would hold up in the amount of time it would take to drive there and back.

In the end, Hannibal decided that plan was far too convoluted to succeed. This was slightly disappointing, as he'd enjoyed his time in Baltimore while it lasted. Still, Hannibal understood that all artists must adapt and evolve their work in order to become greater, and so this sacrifice was worth it.

And just because he was retiring the Ripper didn't mean he had to do so quietly. Hannibal supposed he would simply have to throw a more spectacular banquet to make up for it. And if the parts of the pigs he didn't use ended up carefully disposed of instead of strung up in a public area in his usual artistic and symbolic manner, well, he kept that to himself.

It was in the middle of examining potential houses that Hannibal wondered where Will Graham had chosen. That information, too, had been scrubbed from the internet for safety reasons, but it was reasonably easy for Hannibal to get his hands on the address.

(He *might* have hired an unscrupulous private investigator to follow him home from work. Sometimes traditional methods worked just as well.)

Jack was far less pleased to hear that he would be losing such a great consultant in the middle of a case, not that Hannibal particularly cared. Still, Hannibal was nothing if polite, so he had to at least pretend that he was in the slightest way remorseful about abandoning ship. He decided the best way to break the news to Jack was at his going-away dinner party, where the man would be less likely to make a troublesome scene.

"This is some news, Hannibal. You couldn't have given us an advance warning?" Oh, dear. Jack was annoyed, very annoyed. Had Hannibal been any less assertive, any less powerful in his own right – had Hannibal been an FBI employee under Jack's thumb rather than a wealthy man with his own private practice – he knew for certain Jack would have been completely explosive in an attempt to bully him into staying. Well, Jack couldn't bully him when it was just the two of them, let alone here and now, in Hannibal's domain, surrounded by all of Hannibal's powerful high society friends.

"This *is* my advance warning. I thought it would be least painful to announce my departure, surrounded by fine friends and even finer food." Hannibal watched in pleasure as Jack was forced to step back down. He hadn't been on personal terms with the head of the BAU for as

long as many of the other people sitting at his table tonight, and Jack couldn't very well demand first privileges when so many other people of higher social ranking and longer association were also finding out at the same time. "Dr. Bloom did know, but only because she found out on her own by accident. I had planned to tell everyone at the same time, and so I asked her to keep it a secret until I could organize a *proper* farewell."

And that was that. With Jack properly chastised, the conversation turned to blander topics. "I'll miss you so, Hannibal," Mrs. Komeda was saying. "I have waited so long for another one of your incredible dinner parties, only to find out that this was the last."

"Not so. There will be more in the coming months leading up to my departure. In any event, a great deal of time is still needed to sort out my personal effects. I will not be leaving here until my arrival in California is ready. And Jack, I will of course do my best to provide assistance on any ongoing cases. I hope you understand why I won't be taking any new cases in the near future, but once I have settled properly, I will let you know my availability for remote work."

Some of the ongoing cases were actually Hannibal's fault. Luckily for Jack, they would be closed soon enough. Unluckily for Jack, not in the way he wanted.

Jack was forced to accept Hannibal's extremely reasonable terms, as Hannibal knew he would. Eventually, dinner ended, and after a few more hearty toasts and rounds of fine wine, Hannibal saw them all out into the night.

There was still one last person he had to see.

"Moving on a whim, Hannibal?" Bedelia asked. "That doesn't seem like you. May I ask what brought you this desire to seek out, as you say, newer pastures?"

"I think I have found an opportunity for friendship," Hannibal said simply, and left it at that.

Bedelia fixed him with a long stare, and then finished off the bottle of wine. "I've never said this to any of my past patients, Hannibal, but I do believe you are beyond help."

Meanwhile, in California

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK.

Will groaned and rolled over in his bed, hoping the sound would go away. It didn't, and the dogs started barking on top of that. Grunting in frustration again, he waited another ten seconds before dragging himself out of bed. If people were going to disturb his sleep, then they could handle seeing him in his t-shirt and boxers. Never mind that it was 10 a.m. on a weekday.

"Um, hello?" he said, making sure to keep his voice even and level.

"Hello, Mr. Graham?"

Will blinked and rubbed his eyes. "Um. Yes."

"I'm Officer Martin, and this is Officer Rodriguez. Do you mind if we ask you a few questions?"

Chapter End Notes

I imagine Will lives on the coast, somewhere between Pacifica and Half Moon Bay, and works in the Palo Alto/Mountain View area.

[1] The Turing Test asks the question, "is this computer smart enough to fool a human into thinking it is human?" [↑]

[2] Dress codes at tech companies are basically nonexistent. Everyone is in jeans or shorts and people will legit look at you weird if you wear anything fancier than a button-down and slacks (unless you're a high-level exec). I went to my FAANG interviews in basketball shorts and a wrinkly T-shirt and still got hired. Silicon Valley is heaven for people like Will, who are great at delivering results but don't care about how they act. [↑]

[3] Not a joke: "rubber ducking" is a real strategy for debugging code, where you explain what you've done line by line to a rubber duck (or any inanimate object). It's the same thing as figuring out a problem in the process of asking someone else for help, except this time you don't interrupt another dev who's also working. By forcing yourself to talk through something the entire way instead of skipping over assumptions, you can often find a solution in the process of defining the problem. [↑]

[4] Scrum is a popular method many software development companies use to manage complex tasks, though non-software projects sometimes use it too. [↑]

Router

Chapter Summary

> Why settle for a mere "person suit", when you can have a "cinnamon roll that must be protected at all costs" suit?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I'm Officer Martin, and this is Officer Rodriguez. Do you mind if we ask you a few questions?"

Will blinked, rubbed his eyes, and looked up. When he opened the door he had been expecting to see some door-to-door campaigners against Amazon the company to save Amazon the rainforest or Jehovah's Witnesses or the usual shite, and the appearance of two uniformed police officers took him off-guard. Immediately he went from tired and grumpy to alert and *fucking terrified*, his half-asleep brain going into overdrive, the static resolving into the flash of blinking lights and the wail of sirens..

Fuck, no no no nonononno dammit, I didn't want anything to do with this, shit no no no I spent my whole life avoiding this shit. "Um, sure. I mean, sure as in no, I don't mind. Um. Sorry, I'm not good with English. Yeah."

Despite the fact that he hadn't *done anything*, he couldn't help the little screaming demons on the inside of his head. *They know they know THEY KNOW –*

SHUT UP! Will yelled at himself. He unplugged his brain and then rebooted it. *You don't even know what they're here for yet!*

Rodriguez gave him a once-over. "I'm sorry, did we wake you up?"

Will nodded, trying to make himself look more annoyed than scared. "Had a late night last night. I was working." Inside his head, he was quietly calculating the safest, most anonymous way he could sell off his Bitcoin without attracting the attention of the FBI like the idiots who ran Silk Road [1]. It was possible he wouldn't have to. The IRS didn't know he had any, because he had mined them all back in '09 when they weren't worth anything and so couldn't be considered income, and legally would not have to declare them until he actually sold and paid long-term capital gains tax. But better safe than sorry –

Why are you even thinking about that? You don't even know if you have to yet.

"I see. Well, this is just a formality, and we request that you participate along with the rest of the neighborhood. Did you see or hear anything last night?"

"Um, no. No, I was inside the whole night. I had my sound cancelling headphones on," Will explained. All true so far. Nothing to worry about.

Will tilted his head down and angled his widened eyes upward, so that he looked smaller and his eyes looked rounder. A few years back, there had been an internal company-wide research project on virtual reality and human interaction with computer-generated avatars. The key takeaways were that a) being slightly unrealistic and cartoonish appealed more to customers far better than crossing into the uncanny valley, b) Disney corporation knew exactly what the hell they were doing when they created their modern Kindchenschema for all their main characters, and c) big blue eyes were king. Will had never been great at social interaction, but science was king.

"You said you were working late? How long were you working for? When did you arrive home?"

"I was working from home yesterday. And today too, I guess. So I didn't really *arrive* home. I was holed up in my house the whole time," Will admitted. Now, that could sound either suspicious or sad, and Will was determined for it to be the latter.

"You didn't leave the house at all?"

"I left the house in the morning and early evening to walk my dogs," Will said, and deliberately let the door fall open a little more so that the officers could see his pack clearly running around behind him. Babs, seeing the strangers, yipped once, and the rest followed suit and started barking. Will took his time shushing them, clicking his tongue and speaking in a soothing voice. Adalove bounded up to the door, tongue lolling and tail wagging, and Will gave her a few pats on the head. "Down, 'Love. Remember our manners. These are nice men; they won't hurt you. Good girl," he said gently, then turned back to the officers apologetically. "Sorry about that, she gets excited sometimes."

It seemed to have the desired effect, because when he looked back up, Martin and Rodriguez were smiling. His prediction that they were both dog people had paid off. "She's cute. We've got a few dogs down at the precinct, too. How many do you have?"

"Nine. All rescued strays. Um, I do have the kennel permits, if you want to see. I renewed them just last month. If anyone complained to you guys about noise, er, tell them I'm sorry? I just got my newest from an abusive puppy mill a few days ago and we're still socializing him."

"That won't be necessary for today," Rodriguez said. "We might send down an inspector later to be sure, now that we know they're here, but if you've been keeping up with your permits then you should probably have no trouble with the Kennel/Cattery office. Anyway, I see that they look healthy and happy enough. Plenty of land to run around in. This all your property?"

"Yeah, lines are there, there, and there," Will said, pointing. Even though the officers seemed to be warming up to him as time went by, Will couldn't feel himself loosening up in return. He was getting distinctly uncomfortable with this level of pointless small talk. Building rapport with an interviewee was a great interrogation tactic. But Will couldn't afford to stop

now and make it look like he *was* guilty, and the pointless small talk was ultimately preferable to the alternative.

"What's your occupation?"

Will let out a huge breath. "Software engineer."

And there it was. Both officers shot each other a look. *Ohhh.* Two words that could make anyone in the Bay Area immediately go from "he's a scruffy-looking hobo and possible serial killer" to "he must be absolutely loaded; no wonder he can afford a house with a Midwest-sized backyard in this place."

"Software engineer. Nice, nice. That's a good job, especially around these parts."

"Yeah," Will said, scratching the back of his head in what he hoped passed for a sheepish manner. *Look at me, I'm being self-deprecating at my perceived lack of uniqueness! How normal and relatable!* "Super original, just like everyone else in the Bay."

"Who do you work for?"

Will told them. "Been with them for close to ten years now," he added. *See, I'm not some newcomer outcast to visit suspicion on. I have foundations. My roots are planted deep in this soil. You can trust me.*

Both the officers looked impressed, and a little jealous. They powered on with their questioning. "I see. And can you just confirm to us where you were between the hours of 1 and 2 a.m. last night?"

And there it was, the line they were all waiting for. Will scratched at his beard. "I'm not sure how late I was working, but it was at least until about 2:45 I think, because when I signed off I went straight to bed after getting a glass of water, and that was around 3am."

"That late? Man, you software guys work insane hours!"

"Yeah, it can be like that sometimes."

Martin nodded and kept writing. "You said you were working that whole time; can anyone or anything verify this?"

Will wasn't 100% sure of the legalities or what rights he had to remain silent in this case, but he was certain that immediately clamming up would just paint a bigger target on his back. This wasn't a digital privacy case, where someone in his position was practically *expected* to shout LIBERTY OR DEATH from the rooftops. This was a – well, they hadn't told him what kind of case yet. Cold hard logic hadn't failed him so far, and logic told him that there was nothing to indicate what kind of crime these officers were even investigating.

But the back of his brain, the lizard instinct core, knew. It *knew*, even if Will didn't want to believe it yet. And so he couldn't afford to look even the slightest bit…off.

"Um, one of our teams in our Berlin office ran into a time-sensitive issue so I had to stay up late to help them out. I think they had just started their work day when I started the video call, so it was about 9 or 10 am for them. That was midnight for me. And I was with them for a couple more hours, so yeah. They were just about to go off to their lunch break when I finished helping them. And that was nearly 3 am here, so…12 pm there. Yeah, I think that's about right. Um, we're PST and they're CET, so they're…9 hours ahead? Yeah, 9 hours. Because our London offices are on GMT and they're 7 hours ahead."

Will made sure to fill up his answer with unnecessary numerical details while specifically mentioning the video call, even though he also already had system activity logs and code editing history to prove when he was signed in and what he was doing while there. Anyone with access to the company servers could easily verify that he had definitely been exactly where (and when) he said he was: sorting out an issue with Germany and debugging nonstop since midnight.

"How well do you get along with your neighbors? Do you know them well?"

"Um, we talk, sometimes. I don't really…know them *super* well. I mean, we're friendly, but not, you know, emotionally close or anything. Depending on your definition of emotionally close. Sometimes our dogs might pass each other while we're on walks and we'll let them play together a bit. Mrs. Lee from three houses down the road, she trades me dumplings whenever she needs help on her car so she doesn't have to drive half an hour to the nearest shop. Mrs. Jones from across the street bakes the whole street cookies during the holidays, and I try to help her out with whatever during the rest of the year," Will said warily, while at the same time going into unnecessary detail about homemade comfort food.

"Speaking of Mrs. Jones, do you know of anyone who might have had a problem with her?"

Will felt his heart pause and restart in a spastic fit. "No, not at all. She was everybody's grandmother. I don't – she never raised her voice to anybody, ever. Why, is something wrong? Did something happen to Mrs. Jones?"

The officers didn't answer. "Do you know anyone with access to her house?"

"Technically, everyone. I mean, anyone who comes by, she lets them into the house and tries to feed them. She's that type of old lady."

"Did she ever have visitors from outside the neighborhood, then?"

"I mean, I know she has a caretaker who drops by a few times a week, but for her age she's mostly independent. Martha, that's her caretaker, has been coming around for years now, we all know her. Um, what else? She asked me to help her set up weekly grocery deliveries online last year, but I don't know if she still uses it. I think she gave up shortly after on it because it was just easier to have Martha do it. I know she has family but I don't know them that well because they only ever visit during the holidays."

"I see, thank you. How about you? Any…problems? With any of your other neighbors?"

"No, not really. I'm sure there's drama somewhere, I just don't keep up with it that well. I mostly just mind my own business. Uh, most of the people in this area are retired, so there's a bit of a generational gap, too? I'm just here because I needed a big enough plot of land before I could get the permit for all my rescues," Will said, subliminally emphasizing the fact that all his dogs were rescues. "So I'm afraid I'm not the best person to ask about any of that. I'm a bit out of the loop, you could say."

"No worries, I'm not too great with that sort of thing myself. My wife lives for that kind of neighborhood gossip, though." Martin gave him a conspiratorial grin. "And how long have you been in this area?"

"I mean, I've been working in the Bay Area since my college years. So nearly a decade now. If you're asking for this specific house in this specific neighborhood, a few years less than that. I bought it around '09-ish."

Martin gave an approving nod. "Oh, nice. That was the trough of the Recession, right? That was when my wife and I bought our house, too."

Will chuckled, eager to distract from the rest of everything with utterly banal chit-chat about real estate. Boring was good. Boring was safe. "Yeah, I got lucky. I got it for way cheaper than usual because it was a foreclosure."

"Where were you moving from?"

"I was in an apartment in Sunnyvale before."

"Oh, Sunnyvale! I have a niece in downtown Sunnyvale," Rodriguez said. "Are you originally from California?"

"Nah. I moved around a lot as a kid, but I was born in Louisiana."

"Louisiana? Oh, man, I went to Baton Rouge once during Mardi Gras, and it was *insane*. If I wasn't drunk, I was stuffing myself with beignets. Lovely place."

"Yeah, it's nice." If you didn't count the abject poverty that seemed to surround him and his father everywhere else. Thank God for Mississippi, as his teachers used to say.

"Well, thank you for your answers, sir. That will be all. We'll be in touch if we have more questions."

"Okay. Um, can you tell me what's going on? Is Mrs. Jones okay?" Will asked. Then he decided to tack on, "And what about my dogs, will they be okay? What should I do?"

"I'm afraid we can't comment on an ongoing investigation, but we'll let you know as soon as we're allowed to release details," Martin said. "A statement should be released to the press later this afternoon, so keep a lookout on that." He looked especially pleased at the thought of meeting a man who, upon suspecting some kind of danger or disturbance in the area, put his first thought for his elderly neighbor and pets. "We don't think there is any danger to animals at this particular time, but we highly advise that you carefully lock your windows and doors,

keep a lookout for any suspicious activity, and try not to go anywhere alone at night. In the meantime, we will be sending regular patrols to this area for the next few weeks, and do our best to keep everyone safe. The buddy system is important. You have a wife or girlfriend you can check in with?"

The roar of the sirens seemed to grow louder. "Uh, no. Um, still figuring that out. If you know what I mean." Will looked down shyly and fiddled with the edge of his t-shirt, being as fucking obvious as possible with the implications.

Naturally, the officers cottoned on right away. "It's alright, we don't judge," Martin said hastily, desperately trying to avoid any sort of confrontation that could result in accusations of homophobia and losing his job. Will didn't intend to do anything of the sort, but that didn't mean he couldn't rest on the possibility, just to keep them out of his hair. "So, uh, you have any significant others?"

"Er, not at the moment." It wasn't even that he was uncomfortable with not being completely straight – that part of him was the least of his worries. But making it seem like he was meant that people wouldn't dig deeper into the real source of his awkwardness. Someone with nothing to hide almost certainly had something to hide. Better to disguise his private shame with a different shame of a lesser degree of offense. "I was born in the South, so I was raised in a different environment. I've been here long enough that I'm not really a country boy anymore, but some habits die hard, you know? I had to be extremely careful growing up. Even though everyone's been super nice to me about it here. It's just hard to let go."

Rodriguez looked concerned, but not in a pitiful way. "No kidding? You're doing well now though, right? Everyone's been decent to you?"

"Yeah, I like it a lot better here. I just got a super late start, because, you know, when most kids were figuring themselves out in high school, I didn't have anyone like me. Also I was a shy nerd who was bad at sports, so. You know. Nothing was going to happen even if I wasn't...And when I graduated I thought I was free, but then the Matthew Shepard thing happened the same year I started college. I want to put myself out there; I'm just really bad at it." Technically, not a single statement that Will just said was a lie. Now, whatever conclusions the officers drew from that was not his problem. Nonetheless, it did a good job reassuring the police officers that a man of his age and probable wealth was single because of insecurities over his sexuality, rather than other, less savory reasons.

"Oh man, that's rough. Real shame. God, that was awful." Martin shook his head. "I have family in Wyoming. My aunt's best friend from high school's daughter was in a class with Matthew Shepard when they were at the University of Wyoming."

Will looked down, as if in sympathy. "Yeah. Awful. Um, yeah. I try to put it behind me, though. I'm doing better. Anyway."

"Glad to hear that. You have any family members, friends, or coworkers outside of the area who you can check in with?"

"Yeah, some."

"Alright, keep in touch with them, then. Your dogs are going to be helpful too, but if anything happens they won't be able to talk to us. Be careful, take care of yourself, and please contact us if you come across any new information."

Will waved to them from his porch as the officers got into their patrol car and drove to the next house down. As soon as they were out of sight, he gently closed the door.

Then he collapsed to the ground in a great sinking gasp, exhaling his soul out of his mouth. His heart was being like he just ran ten miles. He could feel the sweat cooling on the back of his neck. His pulse thumped inside of his skull, and his hands were trembling.

Babs nosed at him in worry. He gathered the little dog up in his arms and let the others surround him until he got back to normal.

"God, what's wrong with me? I'm being so stupid. It didn't even have anything to do with me; I don't know why I'm – *god* – " Will passed a hand over his forehead, his eyes, his face, scowling. "This is stupid."

By the next day, however, curiosity had gotten the better of him, and he finally crawled over to his laptop to look up local reports in the vicinity.

Nancy Jones, 83, found dead in her home by her –

Will clapped a hand over his mouth. He closed his eyes and tried to steady himself.

He kept reading.

Nancy Jones, 83, found dead in her home by her personal caregiver. Martha Sanchez, 24, was doing her routine drop-in to deliver medication and help with cleaning, when she found Jones, and immediately called 911. Investigation is ongoing. More details to follow.

Behind the moisture forming in his eyes, he could see her. Mrs. Jones, a kind old lady who liked baking, whose husband had died from a heart attack years prior. A lonely, aging widow who filled the void in her life by making food for her neighbors, and the pendulum started to swing, and *especially the nice young man across the street (the only young man in this neighborhood; all her other neighbors shared her generation) who reminded her of her own grandchildren, except he was far more quiet and well-behaved. Oh, her Mark was such a boisterous little hellraiser, and the twins Richard and Robert weren't any better.*

The pendulum, which he hadn't had to use in years because he had a clock generator [2] in his brain now and that synchronized all his thoughts far more cleanly than any damn pendulum ever could –

Now all three of them had moved to different states for work, and they had college-aged children of their own who hardly ever visited her. But that was all right, because that nice young man from across the street never complained and always helped her out whenever her doors creaked and faucet leaked. Poor boy, he never had a mother, but he deserved one. Her

arthritis was killing her, but that wasn't going to stop her. As long as her eyes and ears still worked she would be finishing these holiday cookies before Christmas Eve!

Switch.

Corpse farm used to grow mushrooms found, FBI baffled –

Switch.

Three young boys between the ages of 8 and 11 found butchered in Miami –

Switch.

Minnesota Shrike CAUGHT! Garret Jacob Hobbs kills daughter and wife in epic final showdown with FBI agents –

Switch.

46-year-old plumber arrested as suspect in the Tennessee Terror murders. Trial set for –

Switch.

Spree shooter tears across three different towns in Iowa before finally being apprehended –

Switch.

Dead or alive? What this mentally insane girl did to her childhood best friend to answer that question will SHOCK YOU!

Switch.

Three families found dead; one son from each missing. FBI are clueless about the identity or motive of the kidnapper –

Switch.

26-year-old man and 13-year-old girl arrested in a string of bloody attacks claim that they are "magical vampire werewolves" –

Switch.

Totem of corpses displayed on a beach in –

SWITCH.

Ambulance driver arrested after five botched back-alley surgeries result in death –

SWITCH.

Mysterious corpses float up around Mississippi river delta and Gulf of Mexico; more corpses with similar wound patterns found buried in deeper inland bayous –

SWITCH.

"Angel Maker" strikes again! Click here for more detailed pictures!

SWITCH.

Another death attributed to the yet-unapprehended "Maestro Killer" has been identified, this time in the shape of a harp. Those with any information are encouraged to contact the FBI hotline at –

FUCKING *SWITCH!*

A wet nose poked at his leg, shocking him out of his stupor. He looked at himself. Shaking and hyperventilating, in horror or excitement, he didn't know. His normal gates seemed to be failing. Outside his window, he could see the blue and red lights still blinking, curious onlookers coming to see what commotion had befallen this normally quiet community.

He immediately yanked the power cable from the wall, despite his compulsion to absolutely chew out any idiot who would treat their machine so poorly at any other time. After a few minutes, or maybe an hour, of sitting at his desk doing nothing but holding his head in his hands, Will plugged his computer back in and rebooted it.

As soon as he saw his desktop, Will began spamming ctrl+Q [3] to close all his windows before his browser could restore them. Then he manually went into his browsing history and purged the whole thing, all sites and cookies and tabs, since the beginning of time. Then, just to be thorough, he also went through and cleared his cache in the rest of the computer as well. With every deletion, every denial that this episode ever happened, he could feel his pulse slowing, slowing, slowing.

Afterwards, he broke out his highest alcohol content whiskey and spent the rest of the day drinking himself into oblivion and decimating his online Go [4] ranking by trying to play against (and getting rightfully trounced by) a bunch of random Koreans while thoroughly inebriated.

For the first time since he was a child, Will's dreams came back. Lurid in their details, sharp in their intensity. He was in Mrs. Jones' kitchen, kneeling by the sink, fixing her leaky faucet, while she puttered about, pulling her freshly baked cookies out of the oven.

But instead of the smell of sugar and butter and chocolate and cinnamon, there was the iron tang of blood. He turned back to the sink, and saw as, instead of water, viscous drops of bright red beaded up through the gaps in the pipes and splattered on the floor. He felt more liquid fall on his face, and his fingers came away similarly red when he tried to wipe at them.

Will looked up.

Mrs. Jones was suspended in the air, speared through the back by an enormous rack of antlers.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

Her blood fell down and splashed on the sink, the faucet, the pipes, Will's face. He followed the antlers to their base, where they were connected to –

It was a creature. A human-elk hybrid of massive proportions. Shadows flickered on the wall, but moon did not shine. The creature was a black hole, a form of pitch and darkness, absorbing all the light from around it.

Will's feet were glued to the ground. He could not move, could not say anything, even as it carved through her flesh like softened butter, claws like sharpened knives, and brought the flesh to its wide gaping maw. Dozens of rows of sharp needlelike teeth emerged as its jaws unhinged, and in one great bite, swallowed the meat whole.

Then, lifting its head, it turned its head to face Will. There was something vaguely human and yet not about its face, the bottom of the uncanny valley. An alien in a strange world, pretending to be what it was not to fit in, just like Will.

The cloak it wore was familiar in more ways than one.

But before Will could get a good look at its face, its dark eyes, one of its antlers caught on the tray of cookies that Mrs. Jones had been preparing on the counter just for Will. Crumbs and caramelized sugar sprayed everywhere, until the inevitable presence of gravity expressed its inescapable result in a great, clattering

CRASH

Will jerked awake in a cold sweat. The dogs were similarly awake, their worried yips and whines startling him out of bed. In his tossing and turning, he had accidentally swiped the heavy lamp on his nightstand to the floor.

The clock on his phone blinked, fluorescent glow illuminating the dark room. It was still the middle of the night.

The adrenaline rush from viewing such a lurid scene inevitably resolved itself into the squalid aftermath of reality. Setting the lamp back to rights. Sweeping up the remaining shards of the broken lightbulb – no cookie crumbs here. Wiping the sweat away, changing his soaked t-shirt and sheets, laying down a towel on the newly clean bed in case he sweated through the cloth again. For some reason, reading through the most obscure operating system architecture he had could not calm his racing heart as it normally did.

Unbidden, out of control. Like he had been infected with some kind of malware. He got up again and sat down at his workstation. His fingers followed familiar patterns, and suddenly he found himself with a terminal open, proxy running, in the evidence servers of the local police [5]. *Already a federal crime, hacking into government property*. But he couldn't stop

himself, knowing he wouldn't get caught, *I'll just be in and out before anyone even knows*. The details hadn't been released yet, but Will just *had to know*.

He read the written reports first. Processing was still taking time. Mrs. Jones had been cut up and broken into hundreds of tiny pieces and rearranged, making the job that much harder for the forensics workers. Identification and reassembly of the pieces revealed that only part of the liver was present, though no one was sure if they had been taken by the killer, if they had just been smashed so badly that crime scene processors were unable to find them, or if some animal had taken them. Will discounted the last option immediately; a hungry animal wouldn't content themselves with only a few pieces.

Maggots crawled behind his eyes. Because there was so little left intact, forensic analysts had been forced to rely on insect activity to determine time of death. Will imagined what the scene would have looked like fresh. It had been hours before Martha had come around to find the body. By then the decomposers had already begun to set in.

So far, no other evidence found for the killer. And it was definitely a human killer. No foreign evidence within the house, except Martha's. Some vomit on the front porch, which Martha also admitted was hers, and the DNA matched. She was currently the top suspect, but only because the homicide department had nothing else to go on. They had taken her into custody for only a few hours to establish her alibi – she had been sleeping at her apartment in Santa Clara all of the previous night, confirmed by all three of her roommates.

With shaking hands, he moved on to the photographs next.

And oh, they were *stunning*.

Even in their grainy quality, interrupted throughout by neon yellow evidence markers, they were indescribable. Despite his limited knowledge of classical art, Will could tell right away that this was a faithful reproduction of desire and death. A gift and a sacrifice, all in one.

It was not a random choice – Mrs. Jones had been deliberately picked for a reason other than her simply being a vulnerable target conveniently living alone. What that reason was, Will could not discern yet. There was no sense of anger or urgency to suggest that this was retaliation for some sort of crime – the cuts, though brutal, had only been a means to an end. Some smaller part of a master plan. Nothing to do with suffering or punishment. Her only crime was simply being in the way. Whoever did this was experienced. It wasn't his first kill. At least, not here. He might have killed elsewhere, maybe in an entirely different state. So why come here, of all places? Why Mrs. Jones, of all people?

Immediately his wonder was cut off with a sharp pang as he suddenly realizes what he was thinking. The death of an old lady who had never done any wrong. The first person to welcome him to the neighborhood when he bought this house. Who mothered him like his own mother never had, not because she found him weak or vulnerable, but because it was her nature to be kind to everyone, even at her own expense. Whose easy, simple, innocent acceptance of all around her convinced Will once and for all that attempting to fit in was worth the discomfort. Whose mere existence allowed Will to forget every past pain that made up who he was, and pretend that he was normal until the heat death of the universe. The embodiment of the American Dream, the white picket fence. Dad coming home from work,

Mom with dinner on the table, a golden retriever playing in the yard, kids doing homework without worrying about if they were going to be living out of the truck again while they depended on an old drunk to scrape up money for rent.

With shame, he once again went through the motions of closing out all his tabs, clearing his history and caches, and leaning down with his head in his hands. "What do I do, Hopsy?" he whispered. The little poodle mix nosed at his face, and he gave her a cursory pat on the head. "Yeah, I don't know either. Come on, guys."

Normally, Will exercised his option to work from home as much as possible. He rarely came in except for meetings that could not be done over video chat. Often, his home-run dog rescue, which he was well known around the office for having, was a good excuse. On days like this, however, he had to get out of the house. Make the long, miserable commute to the office. Well, miserable for most people. For Will, any menial task that could fill up his days was welcomed. If he was on company property, with all their rules and regulations for appropriate workplace browsing, it would certainly remove the temptation of hacking government property to view the private details of an ongoing homicide investigation of all things.

"Come on, boys and girls," he murmured, clicking his tongue. As soon as he grabbed his duffel bag and started filling it up with treats and chew toys, all the dogs began running around, jumping up and down, yipping excitedly. They knew by now that whenever he started packing their things in a bag, it meant they got to go somewhere. To the park, a car ride, it didn't matter. If only he too could find joy in such simple things.

He managed to get everyone herded into his car, and after one final check to make sure the doors and windows were locked, and his security keys and ID badge were all on his person [6], he was off. The sun shone bright as he emerged from the trees, primitive simplicities of nature giving way to tall buildings and shopping centers and venture capitalists, and all the trappings that modern civilization entailed.

Not counting the car, there were six doors between his hearth and civilization. First, his front door. Second, the entrance to the building he worked in, which required a key card scan to open. Third, either the elevator doors or stairs, both of which required another key card scan to unlock. Upon arriving at the floor he worked on, the elevator and stairs both opened to a lobby which was cut off from the rest of the working area by a keycard-operated sliding door. Then, the general lab area where most of the cubicles and monitoring equipment for his team lay. And finally, the door leading to his personal private office, which required both a keycard and a PIN.

The setup was better than most, though in no way perfect. If someone really wanted to, they could pick the lock to his door our break a window. As for the office, theoretically, only full-time employees had access to his building and elevator, and only people specifically on select security teams had access to his floor and lab, and only he had access to his office. In practice, building administrators, janitors, and high-level executives all had passes as well.

It was a common joke among the engineers on his team, to see how far they could get without using their own ID badges. Everyone had managed to make it all the way at least once, and it was practically an initiation challenge to be considered part of the group. The record had been set by one of the new hires from the previous summer, who managed to complete the challenge the very day he started. He had walked in pushing a hand truck stacked to the top with cardboard boxes, wearing the same color polo shirt, vest, and visor as the uniforms of the on-campus delivery service. Plus a clipboard on his belt to really sell the act. After this incident, a new company-wide policy was rolled out: all delivery personnel had to check in at the front desk before proceeding – if the items were small enough to be dropped off, they had to be left there for pickup, and the intended recipient would have to come down themselves to retrieve it. If they were larger items like monitors or desks, they had to be accompanied by one of the security guards specific to the building.

Despite the ramped up security, the attempts at getting to the top floor without scanning a key card once were still a common exercise.

The point was, Will knew all too well how fragile even the most well-defended forts really were. Forts weren't enough. You needed allies to secure your borders, too.

A bark from one of his dogs brought him out of his musings. They had reached the lab. By now he was well-known enough that the dogs were just as much a popular fixture. Alt broke away from the rest of the group and ran up to Bernice, one of the old-timers on the team, demanding pets and treats.

"You'll spoil him," Will said. Bernice rolled her eyes.

"What's the point of having such cute dogs if you don't spoil them?" she shot back, then returned to the dogs. "You're a good boy, yes you are, yes you are! Sit! Roll over! Good boy!"

"No hard feelings, mate, but I think she likes 'em better than you," said Harold, raising his mug of tea.

"I think everyone likes the dogs better than me," Will muttered.

"Oi, not true, I like you!" Harold protested. Bernice snorted. "Oh, piss off, you old hag."

"Nice eyeliner, by the way," Siddarth snarked at him, gesturing at the dark circles under his eyes. "Did something in Europe break again?"

"Nah, nothing like that," Will said softly. He tried to sound nonchalant, but something within him must still be shaken, because it leaked out.

"What's the matter? You okay, man?"

"No, it's just. One of my neighbors died and the police aren't sure how it happened. She was old and everything, so the fact that they're even investigating at all means…well, I don't want to think about it," he confessed.

"Oh, geez, that's…rough. But are you okay, though? I thought you lived in a safe and quiet area."

"I do. I…did."

"So what? Are you planning to move now?"

"I…I don't know. I don't even think any of us should be going anywhere at this second. The police are patrolling the whole neighborhood and they've recommended that we all stay put."

"Have they said what happened, yet?"

"They're not releasing any details, only that she's dead, and police are trying to figure out if it was natural causes or if she was killed. I never worked in law enforcement so I don't know how that's supposed to work," Will said. He didn't mention that he knew more details than what had been released to the press.

"Like what? Killed as in, murdered? Was it a robbery gone wrong?"

"I don't know. I'd rather just come here, you know, get some work done, so I can take my mind off things. The police recommended that we try not to be alone," Will whispered. "She was really nice. I liked her."

"Was she the one who made the cookies?"

"Yeah."

"Oh, god. I'm so sorry, man."

For the rest of the day, Will holed himself up in his office, while his teammates ran interference. If anyone else noticed he was acting a little off, they chalked it up to him being in mourning, maybe some fear and worry over what had happened. Because obviously it was normal to be out of sorts after such an event. Anyone would be, and it wasn't at all a sign of instability.

Eventually, Will had to round up the dogs and take them home. He would have been fine sleeping in the office, but it was unfair to make them do the same. They needed walking, a yard of green grass to run around in, and space to sniff around and explore that wasn't full of wires.

During that whole time, Will hadn't considered once the idea that he would eventually get a new neighbor now that Mrs. Jones was gone.

Maybe he should have.

Chapter End Notes

Why *does* Will have a secret stash of Bitcoin, ready to anonymously and untraceably liquidate at a moment's notice? Hmmm, I wonder.

[1] Bitcoin is anonymous but still traceable: all the transactions are public, and labeled with special ID numbers that show where a bitcoin coming from and going to. Even if they don't show a name, they still leave an easy path for tracking. When the FBI shut down the online black market Silk Road in 2013, they were able to seize all that money because the owners could not hide their wallet IDs. If you want to make your bitcoin transactions both anonymous *and* untraceable you need to use additional programs and encryption/scrambling algorithms. [↑]

[2] A clock generator is a special part of your computer that acts like a metronome to synchronize all the different circuits and such. It's a digital pendulum, but instead of swinging left and right, it jumps from high charge to low charge. [↑]

[3] Ctrl+Q is the Linux equivalent of cmd+Q on Mac or alt+F4 on Windows (the keyboard shortcut that closes your current program). Will's a hardcore nerd; he's not using anything other than Linux. To be precise, he uses Kali Linux (a specific version of Linux customized for hackers and penetration testers). [↑]

[4] Also known as Baduk in Korea or Weiqi in China. A very old strategy board game that is also quite famous in the artificial intelligence community, being more algorithmically complex than chess. [↑]

[5] A terminal is a tool used to send direct commands to a computer. Harder to use for regular people, but faster and more powerful than point-and-click. A proxy is used to disguise your computer's IP address, which websites and law enforcement can use to track your location. [↑]

[6] Security keys are the best form of two-factor authentication and generally look like very small USBs with a touch sensor on them. Safer than simply using a password, confirmation text, or security code. [↑]

Motherboard

Chapter Summary

Hannibal starts spinning his web. Will adds some skeletons to his closet.

Chapter Notes

Reviewers have been curious about Will's financial situation, so I've done the math for y'all (I'm an engineer, can you tell)?

He was about 33 in 2013 when the series timeline began, so: he was born in 1980-ish, met James around 1994, started college in 1998, graduated and started working in 2002. He would have been lucky enough to miss the 2001 dot-com bubble while being present for entirety of the subsequent tech runup that we are all familiar with today.

As a top performer with 10+ years experience, his annual total compensation is around $700k to $1.3M/year. A little less when adjusting to 2013 inflation levels, but a little more since he's on the higher end of the performance spectrum.

For major tech company stock, we're looking at anywhere between 1000% and 8000% return on investment between 2002 and 2013. Bitcoin's ROI from 2009 to 2013 was nearly infinite, even if you factor in the electricity costs of mining.

In total, I estimate Will's official net worth to sit around the $25M range. Double that if you include his secret bitcoin stash. He doesn't have as much as Hannibal or the Vergers, whose generational inherited wealth would add up to billions. However, he does have more money in liquid assets, naturally tends toward a lower-maintenance lifestyle, and is better at traveling under the radar.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Three nights ago

Despite the inconvenience, having to travel across the entire the country undetected, Hannibal couldn't bring himself to regret it. He rarely ever had regrets. Things that didn't turn out as planned were learning experiences, and no matter how tonight turned out, it would be more than worth it.

His Will – and wasn't that something, already thinking of Will as *his* – lived in a secluded (well, as secluded as one could be in a place as crowded as the Bay Area), idyllic

neighborhood with a stunning cliffside view of the Pacific ocean. The houses were well-built, though rather old, and they had backyards – an incredible rarity in a place with such inflated property values [1]. The individual properties were walled off by enormous sequoias that easily dwarfed anything Hannibal had ever seen since leaving Lithuania. The deciduous trees dotting the East Coast certainly couldn't compare.

More importantly, the house Hannibal intended to buy had a basement. He would have to do extra work to get it to his standards, but it was, at the very least, a full-sized basement. A shame it was already occupied, but it wasn't as if the little old lady had long for this world, anyway.

Her entire existence had been bland, contributing neither great ugliness nor great beauty to the world. A life that would have been wasted, had Hannibal not chosen to elevate her. And so she made a worthy sacrifice.

Hannibal generally used rudeness as the metric with which he culled the pigs of the world, but it wasn't necessarily his *only* reason to kill. In the end, there was no personal reason for killing Mrs. Jones – only that she was there, her circumstances were convenient, and allowing her to go for a better purpose was no great loss. Her remaining family definitely did not have enough income to continue paying the California property taxes, and would sell the place as soon as all the inheritance paperwork went through. After this, either Will moved, in which case Hannibal would get to buy his old house and all the little points of contact that came with it, or he didn't move, in which case Hannibal would buy Mrs. Jones' house – an even better result.

It was not his usual style, but Hannibal did not mourn the end of his time as the Chesapeake Ripper long. This was simply another metamorphosis. A new period of his life, with all the wonders change brought.

Hannibal had snapped her neck in her sleep. An unusual mercy, and another deviation from his other hunts, but for practical reasons. He did not have the luxury of a quiet, private space to create his art, and should she manage to scream and be heard by the neighbors, he would not want to get caught here so soon. Hannibal had not officially moved to the West Coast yet and would not officially move here for many months yet – no one knew he was even here. Traversing the country in secret was a fun, though risky, challenge. Once, anyway. Doing so regularly would likely be more problematic than it was worth. Besides, his preparations for framing Frederick Chilton for his crimes were already done for. The opportunity had come at a fortuitous moment as any. Given how loathsome and odious the man generally was, few were willing to step to his defense, and no one missed him.

Afterwards, Hannibal set about creating his tableau. A cut here, a slice there. He painted the blood on the tile with his knife, cut pieces of her muscles and organs to scatter around her kitchen like a Byzantine mosaic. He smashed her bones with a hammer and placed the shards and chunks of marrow between the rest of the meat to create light and shadow. As soon as one entered the home from the front door, one only had to look down to see his creation.

A portrait of flesh. Something beautiful, he decided, but not too obvious. As much as he wished to draw Will's face in the remains of Mrs. Jones, their relationship was still currently

too nascent. Such an approach could be considered too forward, too gauche. Hannibal settled on his own depiction of Achilles and Patroclus instead. It hearkened back to the days when he was still an inexperienced young man copying the masters in Florence. This would be a practice sketch, Hannibal decided. The first of a new form.

Hannibal wondered if the pictures would be published. If Will Graham would see them. If he recognized the figures for what they were, and if he realized what they represented. If he could understand Hannibal's art in the same way he believed his cold, lifeless machines were elegant and human and beautiful. Surely, if he could love them, he could love anything.

California

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

Beep.

Will tried not to cry every time he realized that Mrs. Jones was still dead, but it didn't always work. Part of it was because he genuinely missed her and wanted her back, but the other part of it that he didn't like to think about, was because he couldn't bring himself to hate whoever killed her. Will had done far worse to many others for far less, because he wanted to.

But this felt less like fun and more like an obligation. A chore. A requirement. A duty.

The end result, whatever it was for, had been beautiful. And Will felt just as terrible for wanting to punish the creator, as he felt for *not* wanting to punish him.

In the end, someone *had* to be punished. And if it wasn't going to be whoever took the mother he never had from him, it was going to be someone else.

Multiple someones, in this case.

Because there was always going to be another monster. The one after this one, and the one after that one. And destroying them was the least he could do, for his own peace of mind. Was it fair, to take out his anger and frustration at one person on another? Technically, no, but that didn't matter, and it hadn't mattered for a very long time.

Will groaned and put his head in his hands.

You promised yourself, Will, he chided himself. *You promised you wouldn't do this anymore.*

He always did this, of course. It never stopped him. He would take a break for a few months, but then he would always come back.

He did it because it distracted him from the worse things, the metaphorical methadone to a heroin addict. He did it because it satisfied his darker urges without being as dangerous – not

as easy to get hooked, not as easy to blur the lines…

He did it because he liked it.

He did it because he could.

He did it because even though he was constantly terrified that the next one would be his last and he'd finally get caught, the reality, the *logic* was, Will knew he would never get caught. He was too good for that. He knew all the tricks, all the ins and outs, all the weak points and underfunded institutions that couldn't be bothered to care more than surface level.

"Really, Neumie, he was asking for it," Will whispered, running the payload and starting the rootkit on his sixth target within the last six days [2]. "He *was*. Why else would he secretly spend public funds meant for helping poor children on underground dogfighting rings if he *didn't* want what I'm about to do to him? I'm just giving him what he deserves. It's okay if it restores balance to the universe, right?"

Neumie said nothing, too busy gnawing at his toy dog bone.

Many more months passed. No one came any closer to solving Mrs. Jones' death. Will had a few ideas that he thought were more correct than the speculations he found on the police servers, but not definite enough to risk coming out and getting caught for hacking – or worse, for being accused of the murder itself.

The mood in the neighborhood had grown far more solemn in the meantime, although since the police had successfully cordoned off the area to all reporters, none of the actual pictures of the tableau (because that was what it was) made it out online. There was no hiding that she *had* been killed, because the entire street saw the two dozen police cars with no ambulance, but local authorities probably realized that admitting to a possible serial killer would be detrimental to property values and the local economy.

The result was everyone assumed that Mrs. Jones had been killed because of a robbery gone wrong or something like that. A violent death, but still a "normal" violent death. No one, except for Will, Martha, the local homicide department, and probably Mrs. Jones' family because they had to have gotten the remains somehow, had any idea how bad it really was. And Martha had signed a non-disclosure form. She hadn't been back to the neighborhood since then, having since started working for a different person all the way out in Milpitas.

The police presence continued, but the killer never came back to the area. Or if he did, he hadn't killed that way since. And one incident, no matter how foul, wasn't enough to be considered a serial killer. So the FBI wasn't going to get involved just yet.

Sometimes, Will wondered if he even existed. If Mrs. Jones hadn't just died of a heart attack or stroke in the normal way old people died, and this was just some strange fever dream his brain had cooked up to cope.

Fucked up coping mechanism, if it was. Then again, it wasn't as if his current one wasn't that much better.

Eventually, things died down. The news cycle moved on to something else. Forensic cleaners came in and scrubbed the place down. Real estate agents crawled over the corpse of the property like flies around the carcass. Mrs. Jones' children and grandchildren held a private closed-casket funeral for her and didn't invite any of the neighbors. Will walked his dogs, worked from home when he wanted to, went to work when home got too stifling (or when he ran out of human food), and didn't talk to anyone except to say hello when they passed by each other on the street. Mrs. Lee got her spark plugs replaced for the low low price of an extra batch of mandu. Will ate them with the leftover rice from his lunch like the bachelor scum he was.

He tried and failed to remember the last time he'd actually needed to go properly grocery shopping for something other than dog food ingredients. Or the last time he'd properly cooked something for himself that wasn't reheated leftovers, brought home from campus cafeterias in their provided (100% recycled and biodegradable!) takeout containers to tide him over on the days he worked from home.

The trend of the large tech companies providing free breakfast, lunch, dinner, and snacks for employees might have been a transparent ploy to keep them at work longer and therefore increase productivity for the relatively low averaged price of a bunch of food, but Will wasn't about to complain. It was a far step up from a childhood that involved going hungry if they failed to catch any fish. And the food was more than decent. Not Michelin star by any means, but still extremely above average. That seemed to have been his life for the past decade – probably not the best he could ever be, but close enough to it. No point in risking everything to reach that tiny bit higher.

He had everything he needed, and more than enough money to buy whatever he wanted should a flight of fancy strike him – not that he felt much of a desire for anything material except upgrades to his computer, fishing equipment, and sailboat. His superiors were all pretty hands-off in their management style because of his rank and reputation. No one got in his face to bully or manipulate him into doing things he didn't want, and if they tried he had no trouble telling them to shove off. The last time was when a new upper-level manager had been hired externally, who hadn't understood how things worked – he had been promptly informed of his mistakes and his behavior swiftly rectified by his fellow managers who had been around long enough to know Will's importance. *"Don't antagonize your top performers! Do you* want *to end up like Xerox?"*

Gone were the days where people whispered behind his back or looked at him like there was something wrong with him, like he was somehow *less* or *undesirable* for whatever reason. Stress was basically a foreign concept to him. What was it that people normally stressed about? Bills, work, family, significant others? Will hadn't worried about money since college. He genuinely enjoyed the menial nature of his job. He didn't have family to look after anymore. And he didn't have a girlfriend or boyfriend to keep happy. Perhaps the fact that he didn't have anyone would seem like a negative to others, but personally, Will didn't care about a relationship as much as the idea of a relationship.

There was nothing making him unhappy. Small, petty annoyances, perhaps. Things that were easily dealt with. Everyone had those. It was *normal*. He still didn't like crowds, but they no longer hurt his brain like before. He could look people in the eye without feeling

uncomfortable. The fear of getting committed to a mental institution was still there, but it was outweighed by the fear for getting busted for violating the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act – and Will was confident enough in his ability to never get caught in that respect helped keep the other stuff down.

What did he truly hate, really, apart from being confused about his own identity, fearing that one day he'd lose himself to a proper breakdown, and other people digging around his head and violating his autonomy, either as a result of his empathy, or psychiatrists looking to use him for their research papers, gaining fame and recognition off *his* back? With the exception of the weeks following Mrs. Jones, his thoughts were clearer and more organized than ever. He never had to question himself, never got confused about whose head he was in or what reality was. As for psychiatrists, he avoided them out of habit, but if he ever had to talk to one, it was highly unlikely they'd peg him as anything not neurotypical.

He was a little lonely, perhaps, but he had his dogs. He ate well all the time, slept well most of the time, and wasn't in constant misery or pain, physically or mentally. He felt healthy. He *was* happy. And perfectly in control of himself.

People liked him. Socially, he was doing well. Everything was fine. He could have lived the rest of his life like this.

Then the second murder happened.

Hannibal had been furious when, after weeks of waiting, no pictures of his tableau at Mrs. Jones' house surfaced on the news or internet. There were mentions of Mrs. Jones' death, and her family members bawling for justice, and speculations of everything from gang violence to the mob, but no actual pictures made public. Somehow, the local government had managed to cover it up.

He supposed he had himself to blame. The scene hadn't been public enough (he hadn't wanted the local wildlife to get ahold of the pieces before everyone woke up), and the area was infamous for being quiet, low on crime, and wealthy enough to do this sort of thing. He had grown too used to counting on Freddie Lounds to publicize his acts before the FBI could censor him, but there were no tabloid reporters of equivalent tenaciousness and lack of morals operating on the West Coast.

At least Mrs. Jones' house was already in escrow. Hannibal still had two months left before he was supposed to move. Enough time to firmly cement his new identity – still not yet given a media nickname – as a native California killer, therefore putting him, the new arrival, outside the realm of suspicion.

For the second time, Hannibal found himself making the trip to California. This time, however, he stopped in one of the more impoverished sections of Fremont. Close enough to his first kill to suggest a connection; far away enough to cause confusion.

This time, his design was more solid than what he had left Mrs. Jones. There were two victims this time. One, merely a regular young hoodlum who had sworn and spat at Hannibal on the street. Homeless, high out of his mind, no family or friends to report him missing.

Hannibal split his back open, slicing him lengthwise front-to-back. Hannibal took no organs from him; his blood almost certainly carried all sorts of nasty infections from prolonged needle use.

The second, a healthy, athletic man slightly older than Hannibal. He had catcalled some girls walking by, and when they refused to respond, had insulted them with crude sexual and racial comments. Then, he turned and complained to Hannibal, as if their similar ages would compel agreement on whether being of a certain generation entitled one to favors from the next. Hannibal had sliced this one from top to bottom, too, and sewed the two men together, back to back, like Janus. Looking forward and behind. Past and present, joined. A new part of his life.

Hannibal did take the organs of the second man. It seemed such a waste to leave them. A kidney here, a heart there, one of the lungs. He cut the unused back halves of the bodies and the rest of the organs up into little pieces, like he did Mrs. Jones, and arranged them in a spiral around his modern Janus. A vortex, into which time and history disappeared. Interlacing colors around the two corpses, which had been laid down on the ground, lying on their sides, so that only one arm could be seen. As with Mrs. Jones, it required looking from the top down to see the full picture. Hannibal wondered if anyone would back the connection. Probably not. They deserved it, for censoring the first piece in his new collection.

He was confident that this one, being in a poorer area with fewer resources than the capital-rich South Bay where Will Graham lived, would make the news. Maybe Jack Crawford might even come calling. This latest tableau was different enough from what they knew of the Ripper's previous operations. No sounder dropped in rapid succession. Arguably similar levels of artistry, but the style too different. It also involved two people at once, which his Ripper displays had never done before. If anyone noticed the missing organs, they could easily chalk it up to the killer simply removing them to make the two bodies fit. As the rest of the innards were left on the ground, exposed to the open air, it would be easy to assume that birds and rats were responsible, rather than the killer actually taking the organs with him.

Sure enough, by the time Hannibal was back in Baltimore, with no one any wiser that he'd ever left, headlines were crossing the nation. Even Freddie Lounds had managed to get some pictures. That she found his displays worth flying all the way out to California for was flattering, but Hannibal wanted to know what Will Graham thought. A pity, that as a man in the tech industry and not law enforcement, his opinion wouldn't be much valued in this particular case. Would he be horrified? Would he care? Would he show the vicious satisfaction that Hannibal had seen that day with Jack, or would he feign apathy like corporate America had taught him to do?

Perhaps Hannibal might finally get to see, he mused, and put the finishing touches on his dinner invitations. One final leaving feast. And then, a welcoming celebration, for himself. And for Will Graham.

Hannibal looked back down at Frederick Chilton's unconscious, drugged body and happily hummed Bach's *Charconne* as he put the finishing touches on his grand finale.

California, two months later

The card arrived in an expensive, thick envelope. The paper was glossy, cream-coloured, and silky to the touch. The words were handwritten by a fountain pen, impeccable calligraphy, ink smooth and shiny.

Will believed this might be what the new hires and interns called "extra AF".

"I mean, who the hell still handwrites invitations with a fountain pen on practically *parchment*?" he asked Adalove, who whuffed and got on her hind legs for treats. "No, honey, you just got fed, and if I give you more now the others will want some too." Will squinted at the paper again and tried to decipher the loopy cursive. As with many software engineers, his own handwriting was absolutely atrocious, though a different type of unreadable from the elegant scrawls common to doctors and lawyers. Given his job, he hadn't properly written anything on paper for years apart from signing his own name. In the early days, when the tech giant he worked at had still been a mere startup, Will would occasionally handwrite comments in the margins of design docs. Now, everything had moved online, including the document commenting and editing system. The only handwriting Will ever did anymore was during design meetings, and 99% of that kind of work was minimalist labels on whiteboard diagrams.

"Seems like a bad idea," he muttered to himself, looking at the paper again. He had to admit, though, it drew curiosity. The new neighbor had moved in a few weeks ago, and Will still wasn't sure how he felt about this new interloper in what used to be the husk of Mrs. Jones.

He'd been on edge for the past two months, ever since that other murder had appeared in Milpitas. Local officials had tried to play it off as some sort of gang retaliation, possibly to do with drugs, since the murder had taken place in a poorer neighborhood.

Something in Will, however, told him one hundred percent, that whoever killed the two men two months ago had also killed Mrs. Jones half a year ago. The bodies had been left more intact this time, but there was still the telltale sign of organs being cut up into tiny chunks and scattered about. If it happened again, it would officially mean there was a killer in the area – in Will's mind, at least. Considering Mrs. Jones' death was still covered up, and the kills had been split across two different cities' law enforcement organizations, it might take longer for them to get their act together.

Why the killer had gone through the trouble to meticulously slice everything up into tiny pieces, Will couldn't say. It was useful in creating a mosaic effect, but something told Will that the killer didn't really care about mosaics that much – more like, he cut everything up so thoroughly for a different reason, and afterwards, a mosaic was the only art he could create from what was left.

Then there was the matter of missing pieces from the scattered organs. Cataloguing the hundreds of chunks of tissue had revealed that there was half the mass expected for kidneys and lungs, and no heart tissue. Again, in the Janus kill (which was what Will was calling it, kind of obvious) police had pinned the blame on animals, and evidence workers having trouble reassembling the pieces because there were so many. And again, Will had doubted this conclusion – more bits should have been missing, the scene more disturbed, had wildlife gotten involved.

In the Janus case, the body had been found fairly quickly. Only insects had gotten to it – no birds or rodents yet. The tableau was fully formed. One of the mosaic pieces had rolled slightly out of place by the time the picture in the evidence locker was taken, but no major gaping holes, as there would have been if animals were to blame. Had those pieces also been cut up and meant for the display, they would have been missing in the same proportion as the rest of the body. No, Will was certain those pieces were only missing because the killer intended them to be. Either he threw them away because he didn't want them in the tableau for some reason, or he took them with him and made his creation from the remaining parts he didn't want. Why, again, Will couldn't really say.

Leaving the dinner invitation for now, he fired up Tor browser in a virtual machine and did a quick DuckDuckGo search [3].

why do serial killers take organs

There weren't many publications on the fact. There was the old urban legend of organ harvesters doing back-alley surgeries for money. Garrett Jacob Hobbs, the Minnesota Shrike, had been eating and using up every part of his victims, though he hadn't taken single organs as much as he had just taken the whole body. Frederick Chilton, the Chesapeake Ripper, had had a few missing organs in jars in his basement, but he refused to say what he was using them for and continued to claim his innocence.

Will frowned and clicked on the first link that appeared in the search results.

CHESAPEAKE RIPPER FINALLY ARRESTED! Missing FBI Agent Miriam Lass found alive, escapes imprisonment to identify and arrest DR. FREDERICK CHILTON. Chilton pleading innocence despite overwhelming evidence of guilt. [CLICK HERE TO SEE MORE PICTURES OF THE MURDER BASEMENT] –

He rolled his eyes and clicked the back arrow on his browser, then scrolled down a little further for an actually respectable news source.

FBI profilers suspect he killed out of a need to assert superiority after years as a failed neurosurgeon and a barely average psychiatrist at best. Colleagues mention his publications were consistently criticized and derided for poor science and inaccurate speculation, always falling short and never as good as he thought he was.

"You know, it makes sense now, why he always had such a special affinity for the criminally insane and others. Guys with his pathology, they don't view people as people, simply as objects to get ahead. You're either a stepping stone or an obstacle to him. When it came to vulnerable people, people he deemed as 'mentally and intellectually inferior' – holding power over them made him feel better about himself, and standing next to them made him seem better in comparison," says Dr. Alana Bloom, professor of psychology at Georgetown University and criminal profiling consultant for the BAU.

Chilton was known to be driven by ego, jealousy, and a desire for fame and recognition; he displayed an uncanny willingness to step over others to get ahead in life even as early as during his college years. As a result he had few, if any, friends; he was simultaneously socially isolated and yet desperate for public approval. Former colleagues all expressed

similar sentiment as Dr. Bloom, believing that his desire for popularity was more to feed his ego than for any want of true connection; former girlfriends all mention that they dumped him due to his arrogance, obsequiousness, and condescending nature.

"I always knew there was something wrong with him. I agreed to date him because the first time we met he was charming. But as time went on he just got more and more…off. The entire time we were 'together' I never felt like he cared about me. It felt like he was just keeping me there so he could mansplain shit to me and make himself sound smarter in comparison. Everything we did had to be some kind of competition where he had to come out on top. Whenever we went out, it was always to parties or the opera where he could show me off to his social circle. Not because he was genuinely proud to have me by his side, but because he seemed to think having a woman a decade younger than he was as some kind of, I don't know, possession *would somehow make other people think more highly of him? Spoiler alert, it didn't."*

General consensus seems to converge when asked about what others thought of his personality. However, those who knew him are less sure about whether he knew how others felt about him.

Some believe that he was well aware, and this fed into his insecurities and his desire to prove himself. "Of course he knew. He knew *he had to go into psychiatry because he failed at neurosurgery. He* knew *even after that he was a subpar psychiatrist, judging by how many rebuttals and criticisms he got on his studies, and how many times he got publicly called out in journals. He* knew *how many times he was rejected from presenting at conferences and how empty his audiences were in the few instances he wasn't. He was reminded of this every day, and so I think having this one secret that he knew that everyone else didn't made him feel clever and distinct from the rest of the world," insists Dr. Nadia Kumar. "It's the same reason why anti-vaxxers or flat earthers exist. They're people who inherently aren't special but feel the need to be, entitled to the same sort of groundbreaking insight as Galileo, and so they artificially manufacture a reason to make themselves feel like they are superior and ahead of their time in an otherwise uncaring, stupid world."*

However, others disagree, pointing out his constant bragging and utter inability to read a room. "He's always been…a bit clueless, shall we say. I don't think he realized to the full extent how much he repulsed us, even before he was known to be a murderer. Not only was he a classic example of the Dunning-Kruger effect, but he was also condescending about it. He was the sort of person who absolutely had *to be an expert on everything, acted like the* real *experts who corrected him were wrong, and treated anyone who disagreed with his non-ironic beliefs in outdated Freudian ideas about childhood and gender as if they were simply too stupid to understand it," says Dr. Donald Sutcliffe. "When his attempts to peacock failed, his reasoning wasn't 'I'm not as suave or clever as I think I am,' but 'Someone else is sabotaging me and taking away attention that I deserve'. He wasn't insecure because he didn't think he was good enough, but because he was jealous of those who were genuinely so much better than he was at everything that even he couldn't delude himself into thinking otherwise."*

His penchant for unethical experimentation and prisoner abuse are also well known. "Everyone knew he was abusing his patients and illegally experimenting on them for fame

and profit. But there wasn't much we could do because of how few rights the incarcerated and mentally ill have in this country," Beverly Katz, a hair and fibers forensics specialist from the FBI, stated. "When Chilton initially approached us, boasting that the Chesapeake Ripper hadn't killed in the last two years because he was already caught, we were immediately suspicious because Abel Gideon did not fit the profile. Sure enough, he was using psychic driving to wipe Gideon's memories about himself and plant the idea of being the Ripper in his head, so that he could frame him for his own crimes while simutaneously getting the publicity for already having the Ripper in his custody. We knew that Gideon wasn't the Ripper, but he had knowledge of very specific details about the Ripper cases that only the FBI or the Ripper himself knew about. And since no one at the FBI would tell Gideon these things, Chilton had to be the only one left. Bingo."

Abel Gideon is an inmate at the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, where Chilton was once director. Gideon was not available for comment at this time.

He hadn't bothered to view the Frederick Chilton "trial of the century" while it was making the news rounds. It was still on Youtube. He clicked on the video and hit play.

What followed was…unexpected, to say the least. The more he watched, the more unnerved he became. Not by Chilton, no. It was just the entire…all of it. Something about it was just… wrong. And that really bothered him, because logic had never failed him before, and logic dictated that Chilton was guilty. The DNA evidence, the fingerprints, all the corpses and organs in his basement, Miriam Lass confirming…and yet it felt too easy. Normally, if Will looked at someone truly bad, he could get *some* sort of vibe from them.

Not Chilton, though. He saw the sour desperation of a moron facing a power far greater than he was. Perhaps the Chesapeake Ripper was such a great liar that he could fool even Will, but if he was that good, why was his defense so absolutely abysmal, a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing?

Could Chilton be telling the truth? Was he actually innocent? Because, if so, that meant the real Chesapeake Ripper was still walking among them. And no one wanted to think about that.

Will looked back at Chilton, who was slowly becoming more and more unhinged and hysterical as the trial went on, refusing to listen to his legal counsel's attempts to shush him. The Ripper had been described as a confident, highly intelligent, highly dangerous psychopath. Chilton's entire life, on the other hand, seemed like a comedy of errors. Sure, he was extremely arrogant and lacking in empathy for his "patients" (more like test subjects), but competent? No. No way.

Will thought he was telling the truth. Unless it was some sort of double bluff reverse psychology thing, where he portrayed himself as a weak, snivelling moron. Or perhaps he had been arrogant enough to ensure no one would ever catch him, and suffered a mental breakdown when he turned out to be wrong.

Anyway, what could he do? The trial had ended months ago, and whatever evidence had been checked in pretty much proved beyond all reasonable doubt that he was guilty. The only "proof" of the contrary would be a man with no formal connection to law enforcement saying

"I mean, he *sounds* sincere enough" and expecting that one phrase was somehow enough to override the expert opinions of all the law enforcement and forensics workers who had spent their whole lives doing this. Hadn't he gotten equally annoyed at the FBI for presuming to tell him what to do with his computers?

Stay in your lane. The FBI would laugh him out of court, his reputation would be tarnished for taking the side of someone the entire world had already finished judging, not to mention the risk of publicizing the "spooky voodoo empathy powers" to every psychiatrist in the region. After he'd kept them hidden for so long. Was it worth risking the quiet, peaceful life he'd spent ten whole years of painstaking effort building, to almost certainly fail to help one asshole he didn't even know? And on the off chance that he *did* somehow prove that Chilton was innocent, law enforcement and the victims' loved ones would despise him for taking away their closure and reopening the case.

Besides, even if Chilton was *possibly* innocent, he was still a very odious man. His abuse of the prisoners in the BSHCI was real – that, Will had no doubts about. Chilton had been convicted of first degree murder, kidnapping and unlawful imprisonment and non-consensual medical procedures on Miriam Lass, unethical medical experimentation, and mistreatment of patients and prisoners. Even if he was cleared of the first two charges, he still wouldn't be released from prison for a very, very long time.

But the Ripper's still out there. The real one. He's still out there, still killing. And you might just be the only one who can stop him.

"Not my circus, not my monkeys," Will chanted to himself, like a mantra. Just like how the last therapist he ever saw had told him. Never mind that it had been for a completely unrelated school incident. "None of this has ever been my responsibility, so I shouldn't have to feel guilty about it, nor should I let anyone guilt trip me into thinking that it is. It's not my fault, it's not my fault, it's not my fault."

What Will needed, was a distraction. Will looked at his computer, then at the invitation, then at his computer, then back at the glossy, gold-embossed dinner invitation. Then, before he could chicken out, he checked the RSVP as "attending" and dropped it off in the mailbox of Mrs. Jones' old house.

Chapter End Notes

[1] For those of you wondering about where Will lives, I imagine his property looks like this but with a smaller house and a larger yard. Yes, prices really are that insane, though I imagine Will bought his at about half the price if it was a foreclosure during the Great Recession.

Personality-wise, Will's never been a spendthrift, no matter how much money he actually has, but after spending long enough in a high cost of living location where "4 people paying $1500/month *each* to share a tiny apartment is as good as I'm going to

get" is the general consensus, you start getting desensitized to outrageous dollar values very quickly.

So Will's still a fiscally responsible, frugal sort of guy, but all his internal numbers have been calibrated to Bay Area estimates, so his sense of "reasonable housing price" is slightly out of whack. And his financial situation (remember, tech boom) means he's less hung up about shelling out a little bit for some space and privacy (because let's face it, a ridiculous seven-figure price tag is the only way you'll get a patch of grass larger than a laundry basket in the Bay Area). [↑]

[2] The whole point of a hacker gaining access to a system is so they can do something with it. This is where the payload comes in – it's a customized bundle of malicious code that a hacker can use to interact with a machine after they've compromised it. A rootkit is a special type of program that is often included in a payload, and it gives a hacker complete control over a device. [↑]

[3] A virtual machine is like a computer within a computer where you can isolate your activity so the rest of the system is safe. It's not impossible to "escape" from the virtual machine barrier to the rest of the computer, but generally it's very difficult. Normally they're used to test out viruses and malware in a controlled environment so that the rest of your computer isn't destroyed. Will's using a VM here because he's paranoid.

Tor is a special browser / DuckDuckGo is a special search engine that is harder to track than, say, Chrome or Google. I say harder because nothing's impossible, although Tor is still extremely good. Tor works by bouncing your request off multiple random servers all around the world so that (theoretically) no one watching the network can tell where it came from. [↑]

Solid State Drive

Chapter Summary

Depending on your opinion, Hannibal's attempts at casual flirting can range from anywhere between obsessive to downright terrible.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal's first visitor had not been Will. Instead, he was standing at the edge of his lawn, facing a couple on the sidewalk. On the left, a rotund, red-cheeked, balding, bespectacled man that would not have been out of place as a mall Santa, and on the right, a tanned bleach-blonde woman with artificially whitened teeth and obvious breast implants.

Slightly disappointing, but expected. He couldn't be seen as too eager or obvious, otherwise he might scare the other man off in his desperation. The best seductions happened slowly, with the other party not knowing it was even happening in the first place. A gradual sink, a frog in a boiling pot of water.

"Hello there! We just wanted to welcome you to the neighborhood. I'm Glenn Emerson, and this is my wife, Sydney."

"Pleased to meet you. I'm Dr. Hannibal Lecter."

"Oh, I love what you've done with the place! And thank you so much for the invitations. They're so beautiful," Sydney smiled.

"Thank you so much for welcoming me," Hannibal returned. "I presume you've received my dinner invitation?"

"She was the one who wanted to RSVP in person 'to be friendly'," Glenn joked. "Watch out, she's really here because wants to steal your calligraphy secrets."

"Oh, no need for that," Hannibal replied. "If calligraphy is a hobby of yours, I have plenty of reference books I would be happy to loan you."

Sydney smiled. "I just might take you up on that offer. I must admit, I was surprised to see this house sell so soon. You didn't get too badly overcharged, did you?"

"I was prepared for the housing costs of this region before I moved here. It wasn't as bad as I thought it would be."

"Well, I'm sure Mrs. Jones would have loved it. She was such a sweet old lady, you know?" Glenn said. "I'm sorry, I get sad thinking about it."

"I take it Mrs. Jones was the previous owner of this house?" Hannibal asked. "It is a shame. I wish I could have met her. She sounds like a sweet person."

"Do you know how her sons are doing? All I know about them is they lived out of state. Hardly ever visited," Sydney said, sounding a little judgmental.

"Unfortunately, I never spoke with Mrs. Jones or her family directly. I bought this home through the help of an intermediary real estate company."

"Those rascally real estate agents. They probably picked on you because you're from out of town," Glenn said sagely.

Hannibal feigned confusion. "Picked on me?"

Sydney gently slapped her husband's arm. "Now, Glenn, he's just moved in! Don't say such things. They're not appropriate."

"Is something wrong? I would rather you just tell me now."

Glenn sighed. "To be honest, it's not the most proper thing to talk about. We don't even know what happened. We just know she died, but the local news never officially published what happened to Mrs. Jones. We just all woke up one morning to a bunch of police cars, but no ambulance. And police were going around, knocking on doors and interviewing everyone."

Sydney rolled her eyes. "For heaven's sake, stop scaring him with the conspiracy theories, Glenn! Most likely answer was that it was just some robbery gone wrong. Or maybe she wasn't killed after all. Maybe she fell and hit her head wrong, and by the time that poor girl Martha found her that morning, there was nothing they could do, but they *had* to investigate anyway because she's old and rich."

"Why so many policemen, though? If she just hit her head it would be obvious for a professional caretaker what happened. There must have been something worse. They wouldn't have called so many backup officers if there wasn't a gun involved," Glenn argued, but then turned back to Hannibal sheepishly. "But you have nothing to worry about, Dr. Lecter! I've lived in here since the 90s, and we hardly ever get any trouble. Last time something like this happened was 2003; some old millionaire cut off his son and the kid tried to kill his father for the inheritance. Didn't work; he got caught and now he's in prison for life. Like I said, it's very safe and quiet here. Not at all like the cities further out."

"Glenn!"

"Sorry, sorry darling. I'll see you at the dinner, then?"

Hannibal smiled thinly at him. "Of course. My home is always open to friends."

It occurred to Hannibal, later, that inviting the whole neighborhood to the dinner, while the wiser course of action, was also the more frustrating one. It was unlike Hannibal, to ever feel impatient or frustrated over anything, and yet, Hannibal couldn't help but wish everyone would go home so he could talk to Will Graham alone. Knowing Will, he would probably be one of the first to leave.

"Crisped and roasted pork loin en croute, stuffed with a mushroom pistachio brie, with a cranberry reduction sauce, on a bed of bitter greens," Hannibal announced.

"Oh my god, this is the best thing I've ever tasted," Lester Ruiz, not that Hannibal cared, moaned. Lester had the nicest house at the end of the cul-de-sac, having made his money in the Bay Area real estate boom since the eighties and nineties. The men and women at his end of the table hummed in agreement. A motley collective of venture capitalists, stockbrokers, and other random names from the tech industry.

Even if the delectably budding darkness in Will wasn't so beautiful, he still would have stood out due to age alone.

"You've *got* to tell me how you made this," Theresa Lee pleaded.

"Where did you learn to cook like this?"

"Are you a professional chef?"

"I thought you were a doctor. When did you find the time?"

All the compliments fell on deaf ears. Hannibal found himself only caring what Will thought. He had been quiet the whole evening, though in a clever way that no one else noticed. He replied politely when spoken to, went through the motions of social niceties like a minor chore. The words he said were meaningless in a way that sounded meaningful.

It was baffling.

"What do you think, Will?" he asked.

Will, who had yet to touch the meat, cut a piece off and chewed slowly. Swallowed. After some careful deliberation, he announced, "It's very well made."

Hannibal smiled widely.

"Excuse me, Dr. Lecter, but what are you a doctor in?" someone else asked, and Hannibal was forced to turn his attention to the rest of the table.

"I started out in surgery, but I have since switched over to psychiatry."

"Oh, how interesting!" But Hannibal didn't pay attention to who was talking. He had caught Will out of the corner of his eye. A slight tightening of his hand, nearly impossible to see, had Hannibal been any less than who he was. How interesting, indeed.

"Why?"

Hannibal was shocked out of his musings by the voice of the very person he had lost himself discreetly observing. "Excuse me?"

"Why did you switch from surgery to psychiatry?" Will repeated.

Hannibal took a long sip of his wine as he let his gaze grow contemplative. "I killed a patient. Or rather, I could not save them. But it felt like killing them."

"Surgery is a risky business. Surely you would have grown used to it over time?"

"I did. But it was one too many. So I made the switch to psychiatry. I transferred my passion for anatomy to the culinary arts, and no one has yet died as a result of my therapy. What about you, Will? What do you do for a living?"

Will shrugged. "Software engineer. You'll be hearing that a lot around the bay area."

Mrs. Lee grinned. "He says that like he's not special. Will's not just *any* software engineer, he's the security lead for *all* of – "

"Not the security lead for the whole company," Will said. "I'm just one of many team leads."

"Uh huh," said Mrs. Lee. She gave Hannibal with a conspiratorial wink. "He says that like I'm not a retired techie myself. Boy, don't think I don't see what you're up to. I was working the mazes of Silicon Valley while you were still learning to walk! I was *your* boss' boss when you were still a bitty wee baby entry level new hire fresh out of school. You think I don't know what the security overseer team does? You're just a team lead on paper, but your scope and pay level are equivalent to the company's security lead, last I checked. The only difference between you two is he goes to meetings all day, and you actually code."

"Not so much coding as fixing other people's messed up code," Will said.

Mrs. Lee threw her hands up in the air. "What am I going to do with you, you poor, self-deprecating child?"

"Keep feeding me dumplings probably," Will grinned.

The rest of the table laughed heartily, and Hannibal laughed along with them. On the inside, however, he felt something else bubbling up.

The flames of jealousy, he realized.

Jealousy. Yet another emotion that he rarely allowed himself to feel. Hannibal had no reason to be jealous of anything. He was an apex predator, a prime citizen, the top of the food chain, both literally and metaphorically. Jealousy was unbecoming. A petty emotion for those who were too incompetent to take for themselves what they thought they should have. Men like Chilton got jealous – always reaching for status and honors they would never accomplish.

And yet he was jealous of Mrs. Lee's casual camraderie with Will. Two people joined by a common profession and employer, and a lengthy past relationship involving, as Mrs. Lee was regaling to the other guests right now, car troubles and dumplings. Hannibal considered

himself better with technology than most people his age, but there was a limit to how deeply he understood it. Not in the way Will or Mrs. Lee did, having lived and breathed it for much of their lives.

Hannibal had no doubt he could *learn* it eventually – after all, he studied quantum physics and time and teacups as a hobby – but even then, it had taken him quite a bit of effort to progress past a mere amateur. Enough to understand, and even make a few discoveries, yet not enough for a breakthrough. He decided it would likely be the same situation, should he pick up computer science as a hobby in addition to drawing and music and cooking. It was unlikely that he would be able to outperform Will in this regard – Hannibal would be starting these studies far later, and Will had more time in a day to focus on his specialty. At the very least, however, he would know enough to understand all the inside jokes that were currently limited to only Will and Mrs. Lee – and that made giving it an honest effort worth it.

Maybe he should have killed *her* instead of Mrs. Jones.

"It's a shame the country is so big," Mrs. Lee sighed. "I bet my niece would love bantering with you lot. You wouldn't know it, but she can fit so much sass in such a tiny body."

"Wonder where she gets that from," Will muttered.

"Haaa? Don't you start with me, boy!"

"Where does your niece live?" asked Sydney.

"She's on the east coast. She could have been here, enjoying the nice weather and the ridiculous wealth of the Valley, but no. She decided she wanted to be a hero. Now she's being a glorified vacuum cleaner." Mrs. Lee grinned. "Her words, not mine."

Hannibal raised an eyebrow. "Glorified vacuum cleaner?"

"She works in forensics. Picking up hairs and fibers for the FBI."

Hannibal's other eyebrow joined his first. "You wouldn't be talking about Beverly Katz, would you?"

"What?" Mrs. Lee nearly choked on her wine. "You know her?"

"I have consulted with the FBI, on occasion," said Hannibal, noticing Will's eyes narrow. "She's on Jack Crawford's team. I have heard nothing but positive reviews about her performance."

"Oh, really? Well, I'm so glad! What a small world."

"I had no idea I would be meeting her family so soon," Hannibal said. "Small world, indeed."

"Whoa! Your niece works for the FBI?" Lester asked. "That's so cool!"

"You wouldn't know it, listening to her complain. She says it's boring."

The rest of the table got into a lively discussion about Mrs. Lee's niece, and the FBI, and everything else that Hannibal normally would have paid attention to. Not here, though. His attention was only for Will. All on Will. As the rest of the table was distracted, he turned to his direct right to privately face his guest of honor.

"And how are you enjoying the night so far?"

"The host has excellent taste," Will said stiffly.

"The host is glad to hear it," Hannibal responded in amusement.

There was a long silence as Will paused to give him a sharp cutting stare. Finally, he spoke again.

"I remember you. I spilled coffee on you. And you were there in the room with the FBI, though you hardly spoke. I wouldn't forget a man like Jack Crawford."

Hannibal's heart skipped a beat. So he *had* remembered. "Quite a coincidence."

"Yeah, sure. Real coincidence, seeing you here now."

Hannibal was quite surprised and pleased at Will's memory of him. He hadn't thought Will would have cared. His deductive skills might prove troublesome later on, but Hannibal never backed down from a challenge, or a bit of fun. "That conference was over a year ago. I'm surprised you remember. And as for why I am here now, I was offered an opportunity to teach at Stanford and couldn't very well turn it down."

Will continued to regard him suspiciously. "Well, welcome to California I suppose. Quite a long move, you know. You could have taught on the East Coast. Surely Johns Hopkins was of equal prestige. Or Harvard."

"The position Stanford offered me was far better." This wasn't a lie, though of course Hannibal could have gotten a position of similar ranking from Johns Hopkins if he tried. He hadn't, not that he would tell Will that. "And also, I wished for somewhere with better weather, now that my joints are catching up to me." Hannibal did not like to think of himself as *old* just yet, but the mildness of middle age was certainly a useful shield to hide behind.

"I see. You're right, the weather's a lot better here. Still quite a coincidence, though. Of all the houses around here you find this one?"

"It's a lovely house in a lovely area. I didn't realize who my neighbors would be just yet. I will say, Beverly Katz mentioned her aunt lived in this county once or twice, though not this exact neighborhood, and it must have stuck in my memory as a good place to settle down." This also was not a lie. Hannibal didn't know the other neighbors. He only knew Will. "I asked the realtors to find me something quiet and spacious, away from the bustle of the city. This was one of the few areas left in the region with a large enough backyard for a vegetable garden. Compared to the usual cost of housing around this area, I would say this was a very good deal. The best, actually, by far. Maybe I should have looked into why that was more

carefully. What's done is done, however, and I've no desire for the inconveniences of moving again. This house is perfectly serviceable despite its unfortunate history."

Will blinked. "I'm sure." With a sharp gleam in his eye, he surmised, "I presume Glenn and Sydney already blabbed to you, then?"

How utterly *delightful*. To think that the rest of the world was so blind to only see him as a mere socially awkward software engineer, and not understand the truly dangerous monster of his perception underneath. "I believe they were only trying to be helpful."

"Of course they were. They're nice people. They just like talking. A lot." Will jerked his chin over at the couple, who were getting into a loud debate with Hank Redmond from number four about whether peanut butter was meant to be smooth or crunchy.

"While you, on the other hand, talk so little."

"Brevity is the soul of wit."

"And how wonderfully witty you are," Hannibal smiled, raising his wineglass in a toast. "I look forward to being your neighbor, Will. I believe that between us there is an opportunity for friendship."

That evening, after the dinner party had finished and everyone dispersed off to their respective homes, Will went home and did a quick web search on Hannibal. Using Tor and a VPN from within a virtual machine, of course. It wasn't illegal to stalk your new neighbor, and the chance that anyone would request to see his browsing history was pretty much nil, but it might raise some awkward questions in the infinitesimally improbable event that he got caught. Better to erase that possibility altogether.

At first, the worst of what he could find all related to the Punic Wars. Groaning, Will broke out his custom webcrawling script and re-ran the search, this time filtering out all things mentioning Barca, Carthage, and some comedian named Buress.

This time, the results were more useful – a stellar academic and medical record, a few journal publications, commendations from Johns Hopkins University and Medical Center where he had once been an emergency room surgeon, and a few features in some Baltimore society pages. Will supposed he was lucky that Hannibal's name was unusual enough to keep the number of false positives fairly low. Will looked back at the images taken at the Baltimore opera, full of gilded glittering wealth bathed in golden light from crystal chandeliers. East Coast old money, in all their glory. He supposed it would get tiring after awhile, even to a social butterfly like Dr. Lecter. All rich people liked to play at "simple country living, going into nature, getting away from it all" every now and then – though Will couldn't help but wonder if there was more to it than just that.

He went to exit his webcrawler, when he hesitated. His hands hovered over the keyboard. And then he lowered them back to his lap, and shrugged. It couldn't hurt to leave the thing running. He might rack up some extra electricity and hosting bills, but it wasn't as if he couldn't afford it.

Time passed. Hannibal continued to hold dinner parties, make friendly but not too obvious overtures towards Will, and eventually became settled in his new home. It was an adjustment, being further away from the centers of culture and civilization than he was in Baltimore, but Hannibal found that he did not mind as much as he did. Weekend trips to San Francisco were only a short distance away as long as he timed his departure to avoid traffic, and there was always plenty to do to occupy himself outside of the opera house.

The commute to Stanford was reasonable, if a bit longer than Hannibal found convenient. Luckily, Hannibal only had lectures twice a week, with a discussion section right after his Tuesday lecture and office hours right after his Thursday lecture.

Teaching was both similar and different to practicing psychiatry, he decided. It might not have been as intimate as a one-on-one session, but the breadth of his exerted influence was further. And for the students who came to see him personally – the ones he found to be worth it – their relationships were not so different from those he had with his patients.

Hopefully, he wouldn't get an obsessive student. A Franklyn Froideveaux number two. That would be far more difficult to deal with than an obsessive patient who was a grown adult. His flirtation with Alana, who was already a postdoctoral student by the time she tried to make a move, was scandalous in itself. Hannibal refused to have his plans derailed by some uppity undergraduate with no sense of personal space, or the desperate but talentless sorts offering favors for a higher grade. He made a mental note to himself to set up cameras in his office to cover himself, just in case.

Besides, he had no interest in worthless, immature *students*. His eyes were all on Will Graham. And Hannibal simply needed an excuse to see him again.

He wondered if it would be worth it, re-establishing a private practice in the area. Perhaps. As in Baltimore, this area had no shortage of stressed out souls with more money than sense. In the meantime, he could conduct his research and write his papers at home. Hannibal suspected that Will had a similar arrangement with his employer – a software engineer of his calibre would no doubt have the freedom to work from wherever he liked.

Will Graham's choice of deliberate seclusion began to form a picture in Hannibal's mind, but it was still murky. Why, he wondered, could a man want to be so gloriously sharp and cutting one moment, and then retreat into a shell of social anxiety the next? It was as if he was forcing himself to conform to a vaguely defined shadow of an awkward, harmless programmer, instead of what he really was.

And there *must* be some lovely little reason why someone would choose to hide themselves so carefully. What did Will Graham have to hide, Hannibal wondered?

Hannibal so dearly wanted to cut him open to see what was truly inside.

"You want me to fix your *laptop*?" Will asked incredulously.

"Not fix it; merely some fast advice. I am unsure if its behavior is normal, or if it warrants a trip to a repair shop. The campus technician services have been unable to help me. If you would be so kind?"

Will exhaled softly through his mouth. "I'm a software engineer now. Development. I don't do tech support anymore."

Hannibal lifted an eyebrow. "Of course not. But you did once?"

"That was back in the nineties, and I was just a clerk. Computers have changed a lot since then." But Will grabbed the university-issued laptop and stepped back to allow Hannibal into his house.

Immediately, he was swamped by the sound of barking dogs. "Oh, my."

"*Down,*" Will ordered, and to Hannibal's surprise, the dogs all immediately quietened. In his experience, dogs weren't nearly so easy to handle, especially not in such a large group where one could easily wind all the others up, but Will seemed to be able to command them just as effectively as he commanded men.

"You have them trained very well. They are all very polite; I'm impressed," Hannibal said.

"Yeah? They're the reason why I live all the way out here in the boondocks. California law requires you to have a certain amount of space depending on the number of dogs you have. I needed a big backyard."

"How many dogs?" Hannibal asked, trying to count them. There were…an unusually large amount of pets, for just one man.

"Nine total," Will said sheepishly, scratching the back of his head. "So yeah…you're technically standing in a kennel. They're all rescued strays. That lab mix is Alt, the big one there is Fran, the one with the spots is Hopsy. The super hairy one, no idea what sort of dog he is, that's Babs. Adalove is the yellowish one, some golden retriever mix. Then there's Neumie, the little one, Cookie, the terrier mix, and D.K., the one with the reddish fur. Oh, and Timbee, the fluffy white one. Is that nine? Yeah, that's all of them."

"Interesting choice of names," said Hannibal. "I presume Babs and Adalove are for Charles Babbage and Ada Lovelace?"

"Impressive, you actually got them. Yeah, I named them after famous computer scientists. Big nerd, I know. I bring them into the office; the crew seems to love it."

"Tell me about the others?" Hannibal asked.

"So, Babs, Babbage, and Ada Lovelace, they were very early, you know. Victorian era, theoretical thinking machines, on paper. I found them as puppies in a crate by the roadside. Some people thought Alt was for the Alt in Ctrl+Alt+Delete, but he's actually named for Alan Turing. Most people know him for the Enigma code and all that jazz but he's done way more other stuff, too. Alt was hiding in the dumpster behind my first apartment. Fran was

rescued from a hoarder. She's short for Frances E. Allen, first woman to win the Turing Award – that's like the Nobel Prize for computer scientists, named after Alan Turing from before. She was one of the first parallelization and optimization people, a.k.a. why computers aren't painfully slow and why *you* can open multiple programs and tabs and have everything still run A-OK. And – am I boring you? Most people not in tech don't care about this as much as we nerds do."

"No, please. Go on."

"Ok, so, Hopsy is for Grace Hopper. Invented one of the first linkers, and created tons of programming languages including the very first one, COBOL. Another one of the old-school programmers. Neumie is John von Neumann, he contributed heavily a bunch of basic things on which modern computers are based like von Neumann architecture, linear programming, and so on. Um, those words might not make sense to you but basically so many things would be broken without him. Those two came from a shelter that was closing down. Are you sure you still want me to keep going?"

"Please do," Hannibal said. "I truly am fascinated by everything you say." And he was. Even if so many of these terms were outside the area of Hannibal's expertise, they mattered to Will. And so they mattered to Hannibal, because they were part of what made Will tick. He was carefully jotting down every single one of these names and their accomplishments – these men and women who were so influential that dear Will named his beloved canine companions after them.

"And finally, these three boys came from three different abusive puppy mills. Cookie is the newest one. D.K. for Donald Knuth, who wrote *The Art of Computer Programming,* one of the first books I and most other compsci kids will read. Timbee for Tim Berners-Lee, inventor of the World Wide web. And finally Cookie is short for Stephen Cook, who formalized NP-completeness. Uh, NP-Completeness is a special set of hard problems that can be checked for correctness quickly, but can't be solved quickly. I don't know how much of a mathematics background you have, but that sort of thing's really trippy. It's hard for a lot of people to accept, that some things just can't be solved or answered or even proven."

Hannibal vowed to understand just exactly that by the end of the week.

"Um. I just realized I wasted fifteen whole minutes introducing you to my dogs," Will said.

"Not a waste at all. I have learned something new, about a topic which I am not familiar with. And I got to meet friends who you consider very dear. That is not a waste."

"If you say so," Will muttered, but his cheeks were pink. And what a delightful rosy shade they were, when Will could add colour to his screen-bleached face. "So, the laptop. What's wrong with it, anyway? What did you do?"

Hannibal folded his hands behind his back innocently. "Why do you assume I did anything?"

Will rolled his eyes. "Because it's what they always do. Computers rarely just break on their own." He bit his lip. "Sorry, that was a bit rude."

It was more than a bit rude, but on Will, Hannibal found it charming. "It is running more slowly than usual for a new laptop, but I am unsure if it is slow enough to be considered a problem just yet. I might have clicked on a suspicious link by accident in my email inbox. Also, I was required to install a large amount of custom software for grades and lectures."

"Which email?"

"I reported it as spam; the box has been emptied by now."

"Pity, I could have used it for extra info. Well, what's done is done. Do you mind if I look through your internet history, to see if I can find it?" Will asked.

"Of course." Hannibal had nothing to hide. Nothing that he would be stupid enough to search using a professional laptop, anyway.

Will hummed and began scrolling. "I don't see anything too bad…let me just start with a quick virus scan – oh, hell, why the fuck are they using fucking *McAfee*?" [1] Hannibal watched in fascination as Will's mutters became more and more unintelligible as he sank into his working mindset. He was so closed off normally, and yet he opened up so beautifully when presented with nothing more than a hunk of plastic and metal.

"It was the one recommended for use by the university, and came pre-installed on the machine," Hannibal commented.

Will muttered under his breath angrily. "Oh, *sure*, if you spending 40% of your CPU availability on false positives, annoying popups, and worthless warnings, without having it protect you from common threats. Just because it was the first doesn't mean it's the best. You would think a school famous for its CS department would know better. No *wonder* it's so slow!"

"It's possible they received a special deal from the manufacturers. Companies have been known to do that for educational organizations."

"Yeah, you're probably right. You know what, let me kill this scan, and I'll run the antivirus software *I* use on it. Just – wait a second, I have my Bitdefender installer executable on a thumb drive somewhere…"

He jogged away, further into his house, leaving Hannibal alone in the living room. Well, of course Hannibal wasn't going to waste this opportunity to just sit there. He got up and began exploring. Nothing too out of the ordinary – if Will came back, all he would see was some innocent browsing. The titles of books on the shelf. Bits and pieces of computer chips on the mantle. A work table with – oh, how very, *very* interesting – fishing flies.

"Here," Will said, coming back with a nondescript, black USB stick. "Let me just plug this in and it'll be installed in a jiffy. Will the school mind if I disable your current antivirus program? Generally when multiple different types are installed on the same machine they start interacting with each other in weird ways. [2] Not dangerous, just very annoying for the user. Normal programs starts breaking, you can't download or install legitimate files you want

to, the machine freezes at random times, you know. All that stuff that makes people hate computers."

"I doubt they would care about something like that," Hannibal said jovially.

"All right." Will had the command prompt open and was typing a series of what appeared to be random letters and words, but ended up turning out to be computer commands. They spat back giant wads of unintelligible data that Will had no trouble parsing. "Um, the scan might take awhile, so if you want to get comfortable? Sorry, there's dog hair all over the couch. I don't normally get visitors. Um, do you want anything to drink? Coffee?"

"Coffee would be lovely, thank you."

"Okay. I don't know if it's up to your standards, but. Let me just get this scan started really quick and then I'll be right with you."

Hannibal nodded. "Take your time; I'm in no rush. I apologize for imposing upon you."

"Nah, don't worry about it. I got all my work done yesterday and I have pretty much nothing planned for this weekend." He typed a few more random things and then pressed the enter key, and a new window popped up. "Scan's started. I'll be in the kitchen if you need me."

Hannibal decided it wouldn't hurt to just follow him there. "I'm pleasantly surprised," Hannibal said, looking around and sniffing the air. He could smell the quality of the coffee beans. "That is the exact brand I favor."

Will shrugged. "It was first introduced to me by obnoxious hipsters obsessed with all things organic, ethically sourced, and free trade. A bit expensive for what it is, but I don't really spend much money on anything else. Now I can't go back to the cheap burnt-roasted stuff without tasting their nasty chemically acidic tang."

"There's nothing wrong with indulging in the finer things in life, when you are able," Hannibal commented. "What is the point of living, if you are not there to enjoy it?"

"You sure you aren't a philosopher?" Will asked, peeking out from behind a cupboard door.

"On occasion, I can be."

"Indulging in simple pleasures is all well and good. Unfortunately, it means whenever I'm stuck anywhere with worse coffee, I'll know immediately. It's easier to be pleased if your standards are low. Do you take your coffee with anything? Milk, sugar? I don't have any cream, sorry. I usually just drink it black."

"Pure coffee is perfectly acceptable if the beans are good quality. This is your home; I shall drink it as you do."

Will gave him a crooked little grin. "I thought hosts were supposed to cater to their guests' needs?"

"And guests should respect the personal rules of the host. A fair exchange of hospitality, social rules common to disparate societies all over the world. Even today, when modern society has replaced feudal lords, the pact between host and guest is still very sacred."

"What century did you walk out of? You sure you're not a lost time traveller?"

"In a sense, all of us are occasionally travellers lost in time."

Will snorted. "Oh my god, get out of here," he muttered, but there was no heat to his words.

And so they talked, over coffee and little nothings. Of hospital directors and tech CEOs. Of privacy and security and the FBI. Of gunshot wounds and stabbings in the emergency room parking lot. Of Hannibal's drawings and music. Will's fish and sailboats. Florence and Paris and the American South. Haute cuisine at fancy dinner parties and homemade dog food. Philosophy and mathematics and everything in between. The little toy robot sitting on Will's mantle. Small and ugly and clearly made by inexperienced hands, but made all the more lovely by its significance to Will.

Too soon, however, Hannibal's computer pinged with the notification that the scan was done. In that moment, all he wanted to do was to smash it on the ground and break it again so that he could stay for longer. Instead, he accepted the machine and charger back with a grateful nod and handshake.

"Did you find out anything of importance?" Hannibal asked, knowing the answer would be no.

"Not really," Will shrugged. "I did see some random browser extensions that didn't really do anything, so I disabled them for you. Also, there was a bunch of bloatware and adware that came preinstalled on the computer by the manufacturer – I hate this new trend of them doing that – which I went and got rid of. Otherwise, you're good to go. Virus and malware scanners came up clean. If it's still running slowly, just let me know. Unfortunately there's nothing I can do about the custom software that you were forced to install by the school – I assume Stanford wants you to use those specific programs for presentations and grades."

"You would be correct."

"Then I guess we just have to deal with it for now. It's possible the programs weren't optimized for this particular model of laptop and operating system. So yeah, let me know if you're still having trouble, or if the computer is so annoyingly slow that it's unusable."

"Of course. Thank you for your help, again."

Will scratched his head awkwardly. "Well, I'll see you around. I do have to get up early tomorrow because I have some errands to run in San Francisco, so…but it was nice talking to you, and everything."

"Then I will let you do so, Will. Take care."

As Hannibal walked back across the street to his ever-empty house, he decided that he needed to stock up his pantry with some more meat.

Chapter End Notes

My headcanon regarding Beverly's family – the Katzes are Korean, but Beverly's father was a Korean War-era orphan who got adopted by a German-American family and took their surname. Beverly's mom and Mrs. Lee are sisters. I like to think that Mrs. Lee was Beverly's "cool aunt" growing up, and now Beverly is the "cool aunt" to her niblings. Mrs. Lee and Beverly's mom are sisters.

[1] There's nothing bad about McAfee in particular but it was notorious for doing this years ago and hasn't gotten much better since. It's one of those things that aren't the best, but still good enough at their job for most people who aren't and don't expect to be experts. Kind of like how the average Joe is fine with using any kitchen knife that works, but more serious chefs want specific brands and types of knives. [↑]

[2] The true irony is that most antivirus programs act like viruses themselves. This is because they do a lot of scanning, memory access, and activity monitoring, which normal programs don't do. So, two antivirus programs on the same machine might think *each other* are viruses and attempt to block/disable/delete/report each other, which can really screw up a machine. Or, if they're smart enough to recognize each other, they'll still make a computer super slow because virus scanners do take quite a bit of energy and processing power. [↑]

Graphics Card

Chapter Summary

Out with the old, and in with the new.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal waited two weeks before he contacted Will again.

That evening, at a time he knew Will would just be returning home from walking his dogs, Hannibal sauntered up to the sidewalk before Will's front yard. "Hello, Will."

"Oh, hey, Dr. Lecter. What's up?"

"I wanted to thank you for helping me with my machine the other day. You were right; it has been running much faster since you disabled the unnecessary programs."

"Glad to hear it." Will's face was as inscrutable as ever, though the edges had softened somewhat – sanded down by Hannibal's persuasions.

"I was planning to hold another dinner soon, this time with fresher ingredients. Would you like to accompany me to the farmers' market this weekend?" At Will's hesitation, Hannibal pressed, despite himself, "We can, if you like, bring your dogs."

Will regarded him skeptically. "Aren't you not supposed to do that? Dogs and open air markets are a recipe for disaster. Even if they're well-trained."

"There is a dog-friendly market I've found that is a little further north than the ones you are probably familiar with. The area is wider and less crowded, and the meat stalls are sectioned off in their own area. We should have no problem, even if there are nine."

"So are we taking our own cars, then, or do you mean to stuff nine dogs in the back of your Bentley?"

Hannibal smiled indulgently. "I do, in fact, own other vehicles that will have plenty of space for your pets."

Will snorted.

"Something funny?" Hannibal asked.

"Trying to picture you with one of those enormous minivans that all the suburban moms seem to drive. Or do you mean one of those gas-guzzling monstrosities with the wheels jacked up all the way to the top?"

Hannibal turned his nose up. "I assure you, Will, there are plenty of large cars that can still resemble some modicum of elegance."

"Sure, I'll hold you to that."

"You still haven't told me whether or not you've agreed to accompany me," Hannibal prodded.

"Why me, though?" Will asked, purposefully coy.

"It is like I said before. I see between us the possibility of friendship. Is this not what friends do, spending time together?"

"Dogs and all?" Will teased.

Hannibal wrinkled his nose, but said, "Dogs and all."

Will gave him another long look, then sighed, laughing. "I won't torture you with the smell of nine dogs sinking into the leather of your car seats, promise. I can get someone to watch the dogs for a few hours."

"You and me, Saturday morning, then? If you don't mind waking up early on a weekend. The market opens at 7:00 AM, and I would like to get there as early as possible for fresh ingredients."

"Bar any late-night emergencies, yeah. I'm used to getting up at ungodly hours in the morning, whenever I want to go fishing."

"Do you fish often?" Hannibal asked.

"When I can. I get most of my day-to-day food from the office but nothing beats freshly caught from the wild."

"I agree. I, too, prefer my meat free game."

"So, where do you plan to go?"

"San Francisco. According to the online reviews I've read, Sunday Marin is well-organized and has a large selection. It will be good for a day trip, and I will get to see the Golden Gate Bridge."

"It's not that special," Will muttered, but he was smiling. "It's not even golden."

That morning, Will felt hesitation, even as he handed his dogs off to the doggy daycare employee and walked across the street to where Hannibal was waiting with his car. He still

had no idea what Hannibal wanted from him. Somehow, it felt way more complicated than mere overtures of friendship.

The ride settled into a pleasant silence, right up until they approached the Golden Gate Bridge. "Why is it so crowded already? Traffic around here is always bad, but it shouldn't be *this* bad this early in the morning. Especially not on a weekend." Will squinted at his phone. "No accidents, no large conferences that I've forgotten about."

Hannibal's face was frozen, something reptilian peeking out. "It seems as if something has been cordoned off," he said. Ahead of them, Will could make out red and blue flashes, the lights bursting in the early morning sunrise to the rhythm of sirens.

"What is going *on*?" Will muttered, as the line of cars began moving again.

"I can't be exactly certain," said Hannibal, "but I suspect we will soon find out. I do not see any detour signs set up yet."

"I don't even think this street *can* be detoured," said Will. "Otherwise they'd have to shut down the entire Golden Gate Bridge. They've done it before, to do repairs and stuff, but those are always scheduled way in advance. Normally, even if an eighteen-wheeler overturned, they'd still clean out a lane to keep people moving. The economy is too important to stop traffic."

"We might possibly simply be a victim of timing," Hannibal pointed out. "Too late to witness the accident, but too early for the cleanup crews to have arrived."

As the car crept forward, the atmosphere inside turned more and more oppressive until, finally, Will had to crank down a window for some fresh air. Immediately, he realized his mistake, and tried to roll the window back up, but it was too late.

The stench, borne a great distance by the early morning wind, hit him directly in the face, and he bent over and gagged.

"Oh my god," he whispered.

He turned to look at Hannibal, who seemed to be far better off than he was. His face maintained its composure, only betrayed by a wrinkling of his nose and a look of sympathy at Will. He reached into a hidden compartment beneath the seats and emerged with a plastic miniature trash bag, which he thrust at Will.

Will took it gratefully and gagged into it again as Hannibal rolled the windows back up and started the vent. The clean air recirculating into the car and the steady pressure of Hannibal's hand on the back of his shoulder, however, did little to settle Will's nerves.

Especially since the traffic crawled back to a stop again, conveniently parking the car right in viewing distance of the source of the rot.

"I apologize, Will," Hannibal said. "The smell of decomposition is never pleasant." He reached across the console, past Will's lap, and opened up the glove compartment. "There is a

jar of peppermint oil in a plastic bag on your far side. A dab of it underneath the nose should do the trick. It is an old habit from when I used to work in surgery. I find the smell of extract more pleasant than artificial air fresheners."

"Did you deal with this a lot, when working as a surgeon?" Will asked.

"More during my days assisting the FBI as a profiler, than as a surgeon," Hannibal said. "In a hospital, we generally do not deal with those so far gone – and most of the rooms are air conditioned besides. Unpleasant smells have more to do with, ah, bodily fluids, gangrene, and poor hygiene than…well…"

But Will couldn't bring himself to listen anymore. The tableau stood right ahead, just a few cars away. As traffic continued to inch forward, he would soon be sitting directly before it. A front row seat.

Five bodies, this time. All skinned, with their skeletons and muscles joined together.

In life, they were nothing.

In death, they formed the most massive, monstrous stag Will had ever seen.

Looming, dark, mottled flesh, skinned and joined like some Frankenstein's creation. Muscle and blood, once pink and red, oxidized into browns and purples, silhouette black against the rising sun behind it.

Death made life, staring him in the face.

The two largest corpses made the base, their feet broken and curled into themselves to form hooves. Their upper bodies were joined head to head to form the belly, and two other corpses were joined on top of that for the back – altogether, four corpses formed the body of the stag.

The last person was used to make the neck and head, the bones of the arms poking out of the shoulders to form antlers. And, as always, he cut up remaining pieces and scattered them around, this time, to make a meadow on which his stag could step.

Will could not tear his face away. Even without reading the police reports, Will *knew* that pieces would be missing. Just like he knew, based off a few error printouts, that some poor bastard had forgotten to set a security bit, or mixed up two similarly-named fields in an open-source function, or used "==" instead of ">=". [1] He *knew*, that whoever killed Mrs. Jones and the two Januses, had killed the five people making up the stag. He *knew*, that this display had been even easier to disguise than the other two.

This time, a strip of muscle missing from the lower back of one of the women forming the body, two chunks of meat from the two thighs of the man forming the head. instead of internal organs missing. And the structure itself was extremely complex. Once the police managed to separate the bodies, if they noticed the missing pieces at all, they could easily just assume that the killer had cut off those parts to make the corpses fit together better.

At least, that was his intention, but Will could immediately see that it was off. He had dealt with security breaches his whole life, but he knew a red herring when he saw one. None of the organs missing, but pieces of missing muscle? Definitely taken, definitely the same killer.

But why?

Why?

Why?

W–

"–ill? Will?"

Will blinked and jerked awake from his trance. "Uh, y-yeah?"

"Are you all right?" Hannibal's hand was on his forehead. It moved, softly, slowly, over to the side of his face, his thumb stroking at his cheek. His mouth.

Will sucked in a heavy breath and let it all out. They had already driven past the nightmare stag, and were now back on open, unfettered road. "Yeah. I'm fine. Just. Just give me a second."

Hannibal's hand dropped away. "I'm sorry. I know this is not what you expected on a nice day out. Would you prefer to return home?"

If they turned around now, that would mean driving right by past that stag again. No, better to kill some time at the farmers' market first and wait for everything to get cleaned up, and then go back home in the evening when the streets were all clear and the stag was gone.

"Let's…let's just do what we came here to do. You wanted fresh vegetables, right?"

"And some eggs and cheese, if possible. But if you would feel more comfortable at home, we can always save this outing for a different trip."

"No, no, I'm fine," Will protested. "I'm fine."

They arrived at a stoplight, and Hannibal turned to look at him. He regarded Will for quite some time, until Will squirmed under his gaze, feeling his layers peeled back.

"Where did you go, William?" Hannibal asked softly. "What did you see?"

Will crossed his arms. "Nowhere. Nothing."

Hannibal sighed, and moved forward again as the lights turned green. "It's alright if you are not ready to speak of it yet, but I would advise you against internalizing it. It is beneficial for you to air your true feelings before they have time to fester. You don't have to hide from me, Will."

Will was silent for awhile as he stewed over Hannibal's words. Finally, he said, "Janus."

Hannibal paused for a split second, so quick and subtle that most people would not have spotted it at all. "The Roman god? What about him?"

"There was a murder. Just a short while ago, before you moved here. It was further south, down in Fremont. Two guys sewn together, back to back, with bits and pieces missing."

"Were there pieces missing from that display back there? I apologize, I was distracted," Hannibal said, gesturing to the steering wheel. His eyes were on Will the entire time.

"Yeah. There were definitely pieces missing."

"You could tell, even from here inside the car?"

Will hesitated. "Well, I mean, I don't know for sure." *No need to let him know just* why *you can tell so easily.*

"And yet you were very sure. You said there were definitely pieces missing. May I ask how you knew?" Hannibal asked.

Will cursed internally, but on the outside he kept his face level. "I am not forensic or medical expert, not like you. But I've worked with my hands before, fixing and building houses and boats and cars. So I have a decently good eye for estimating size, positioning, that sort of thing. I mean, you saw that…deer thing, even if you were driving. Given its shape, versus the shape of a regular human body, you'd *have* to do some kind of adjustment to make everything fit."

It was only after he said everything that he realized how that must have sounded. Will tacked on belatedly, "I mean, it was awful for the victims, obviously. I didn't mean to be…callous or anything."

Hannibal was quiet for a moment. Finally, he said, "There is a great deal of societal pressure over how we are supposed to react to and deal with trauma and death. In my experience, however, there is no one proper way to go about doing it. Do not feel guilty over stating your mind, even if it goes against the grain."

Will felt himself relax slightly, completely involuntarily. "Okay."

"Going back to what you were saying before. You believe this to be the same killer as an earlier murder in the general area?" Hannibal asked. "Then this is an escalation."

"I'm not a professional profiler. You would know better than me," said Will.

"If what you say is true, then the mode of operation does sound similar enough to warrant a closer look. I would need to see the pictures for a better guess. I have no doubt that the murders we just passed will come under the FBI's purview for its sheer theatricality sometime soon, if not already. And should it end up being the same person responsible for the…Janus, as you call it, I have faith they will find the connections. The BAU is likely already in the process of profiling and drawing connections between those two cases as we speak."

"I should hope so. If a regular guy like me can draw the connections, then so should they. They're professionals getting paid to do this exact job," Will muttered.

"Ah, yes. Professionals. Speaking of which, Jack Crawford will most likely get personally involved if this is confirmed to be the same pereson," said Hannibal.

Will made a face. "As long as he stays out of my way, we should be fine. You of course remember why we don't get along. No cell phones involved here."

"Unfortunately, if things end up getting worse, Agent Crawford might call upon me to assist once again. He has many psychiatrists and criminal psychologists at his disposal, but he prefers to utilize a small subgroup of high performers. At least, when it comes to case closure rates. For all his faults, he has a talent for finding and picking those who service him the best."

"Oh, yes. For all his faults. Absolutely."

Hannibal hummed. "Jack does have a bit of an abrasive personality."

"You've worked with him. How bad is he really, to his subordinates? You saw how he acted with me, and I was an expert in a boardroom surrounded by other experts and high-ranking executives – I dread to think of how he abuses his power against those who do not have the same recourse."

"I believe he is what the average American office worker would call a very gung-ho, hands-on, results-oriented manager," Hannibal replied, a tiny grin on his face.

Will blinked, and before he could control himself, laughter bubbled up straight out of his diaphragm. "You are *such* a snarky bitch."

"No more than you," Hannibal replied smoothly.

"You wouldn't be out of place among those passive aggressive Southern housewies," said Will. "I prefer a more direct method."

"I suppose verbal assassination yields better results against the perpetually oblivious than a thinly veiled insult," Hannibal commented, pulling into the parking lot of the market. "Still, a ticking time bomb, unleashed against the right people, can be extremely effective."

"Yeah, but what's the point, if you're not there to see their reactions?" Will parried.

Hannibal was silent for a long moment, still regarding Will in that gaze of his. Finally, he smiled, and murmured, "What is the point, indeed."

Hannibal had strategically positioned the tableau in a location he knew they would have to drive past on the way to the farmers' market, but he hadn't expected the visceral strength of Will's reaction – his disgust at the smell aside. A bit unfortunate, but expected. Unlike medicine or law enforcement, his profession did not lend itself to building up a tolerance to bodily fluids and the odor of death.

What Hannibal had hoped for was that Will's fascination and innermost thought would override his instictive bodily reactions, and he had delivered.

And oh, *how* had he delivered.

What beautiful insight. Hannibal supposed he was lucky that Will was a programmer instead of an FBI agent. *Let Jack Crawford figure out that one*, he thought. Hannibal doubted anyone would connect his new collection to the Chesapeake Ripper, though. As far as the FBI and the rest of the world were concerned, the Ripper was Chilton, and Chilton was caught.

Hannibal smiled to himself as he picked up a tomato to inspect it for quality. Today had turned out better than he hoped.

"Not going to buy any meat from here?" Will asked. The fresh air and clean smells of the farmers' market had since seemed adequate to distract Will from the earlier scene of the day. While Hannibal perused the vegetable selections of local vendors, Will lingered at a meat stall, eyeing up some chunks of bone marrow for his dogs.

"Unfortunately, it is a long drive, and I don't know if the traffic will have cleared by the time we head back," Hannibal said smoothly. "I've decided to play it safe and get this week's meat and dairy locally."

Will dodged around a young couple and their baby as they stopped at a stall giving out fresh samples of honeycomb in little biodegrable cups. Hannibal used the provided toothpick to eat his as cleanly as possible. Will chose to forgo the toothpick altogether and tossed back the little piece of honeycomb like he was drinking a shot.

"You know, there's a guy on the distributed systems team that's into beekeeping," said Will. "He passes out honeycomb samples sometimes, though I don't think it's as professionally cared for as these guys," he said, gesturing back to the stall owner. "He's got lots of cool stories on hive insects. Have you ever seen honeybees dance [2] ? It's pretty neat."

"A completely alien mind, right here on Earth," said Hannibal. "A small set of simple rules that can give rise to elegant solutions to incredibly complex problems. A group of simple units that suddenly become greater than the sum of its parts when working together."

Like how five pigs in their normal lives could become something greater through their mutual deaths. Hannibal hadn't realized how uninspired his single-portrait style had become until he decided to branch back out into this new thing.

Will nodded. "There are slime molds that can, in as little as a day, recreate the public transport networks between major cities that expert civil engineers painstakingly worked on for years." [3]

"And yet we remarkably still know close to nothing of how they work or think."

"Because human intelligence is not the only form of intelligence."

"There are many humans at the edges of the bell curve that one might consider aneurotypical. And yet when we compare them to the vast array of life forms available just on our planet, let alone the rest of the universe, we see that we are not so different after all, in the grand scheme of things."

"That's why I always laugh when aliens in science fiction, even when someone has bothered to come up with a foreign language for them, assume that their language is spoken or that their counting system is in base ten." [4]

They continued to debate the nature of intelligence and interactions all the way back, until Hannibal finally pulled his car into the driveway without realizing that any time had passed at all. It was not until Will had his fingers on the door handle that Hannibal realized, he did not want their time together to end just yet.

Unbidden, he reached out and grasped Will's other wrist. "Would you like to stay for lunch?"

Will hesitated. "I need to check on my dogs."

"Then check on them. And then you can come over. Or I can come to you."

Will looked at him again. He blinked. Sighed. Warred internally with himself. Half a dozen different emotions flickered over his face before he settled on nervous delight. "I'll see to my dogs, and then I'll come over. That way you have access to all your cooking equipment and other ingredients."

Will turned out to be a surprisingly competent sous-chef for all that he claimed to never cook and rely on company-provided food for nourishment. "I make my dog food," he explained.

Hannibal accepted the cutting board of chopped vegetables with a smile. They were not the best, but the sizes were uniform enough. He was more interested in what he perceived to be Will's initial hesitation in entering the kitchen. Will had deflected with some self-deprecating humor about his culinary skills, or lack thereof, but to Hannibal it seemed obvious that there was more behind it. "And yet you refuse to cook for yourself?"

"It's not that I refuse, it's just that there's no need. There are other people I can trust to make human food better than I can. But the same isn't true for dog food."

Hannibal, having only had hospital cafeterias as a reference, winced at the thought. Even if Will claimed that the meals he got regularly were many levels better than hospital food, there was a limit to how good massed-produced buffet lines could really be.

"Don't," Will said.

Hannibal lifted an eyebrow. "Hmmm?"

"I can tell what you're thinking. I promise you, I'm more than fine."

"There is nothing wrong with wanting just a little better than what you already have," Hannibal protested.

"Yeah, tell that to Napoleon. Sometimes you need to quit while you're ahead."

Hannibal was concerned to find his exasperation was tinged with fondness. "There is a difference between attempting to conquer Europe and getting used to slightly better food."

"But then how would corporate America squeeze the greatest amount of work out of her employees?" Will asked, grinning. "What are we making, anyway?"

"I thought to attempt a Persian theme today. Khoresh Gheymeh, a stew traditionally made from beef, split peas, onions, dried limes, and crisped saffron potatoes, served over aromatic rice. Salad Shirazi, made from cucumbers, tomatoes, and onions tossed in herbs, lime juice, and oil. And for dessert, Fereni, a milk and rice custard topped with pistachos." Hannibal gave the stew a taste. Traditional Iranian chefs would probably not approve of his substitute for the beef in the stew, but then again, most people wouldn't.

"Sounds good. They serve 'Persian' food in the canteen sometimes, and it's decent, but not great. Not like this."

"I hope to change your mind, then, about being content with decent and great."

"Yeah, but I don't want to be that asshole that brings my own food to work when literally there is free food right there. Going to lunch together is one of the few ways I actually socialize with my team."

"And socializing with me?"

Will turned slightly pink. "…I suppose so."

"Well, then, let us eat."

The table was set, and the meal was transferred into large serving dishes and arranged between them, family-style. It was perfectly cooked, as always, but Hannibal found he cared little of how it tasted to him. Instead, he found himself observing Will carefully as he took his first bite.

Will noticed his staring and gave a little smile. "Why are you waiting for me to compliment you? It's good and you know it."

"I wished to see what you would think of something you had a hand in preparing yourself."

Will rolled his eyes. "I chopped vegetables. You were the one watching the stove and doing the seasoning. I suppose, if you wish for me to criticize the dish, the pieces are not evenly cut."

"You are too hard on yourself. It was a valiant effort."

"Like I said. Gourmet dog food. And if you think I'm too hard on myself you should see my code reviews."

"To think you were so afraid of entering the kitchen before," Hannibal teased.

Will laughed, but it was just on the edge of too loud to be real. "What can I say. Your kitchen is very intimidating."

"Is it now? I will admit I did some remodeling when I moved in."

"You've definitely done a lot to the place. It looks more…professional. Lots of fancy gadgets and appliances that I don't know what they're for. Thousand-dollar Japanese knives that I'm afraid to use wrong and chip." He went quiet for a bit. "Mrs. Jones didn't have anything like that. She had money because of her husband, but at heart she was a simple woman. A bit like me."

Hannibal let his eyes soften. "She sounds like a kind woman."

"She was. Um. I didn't come over to her place often, since I had my dogs and work, and she already had Martha, her caretaker, to help her out. But I've fixed her faucets once or twice."

"Is that why you were uncomfortable, earlier?"

Will turned red. "Fucking psychiatrists," he muttered.

"You don't have to be embarrassed. I assume, despite your hermit tendencies, you were friendly neighbors. Her sudden loss must have come as a blow."

Will sighed. "… Yeah. I…yeah. I had nightmares, after I heard the news. I dreamed I was back in her kitchen – well, your kitchen now – and I was fixing her faucet, while she baked cookies. And then I looked up, and she was dead."

"And then you wake up from the dream, only to realize that it is still real."

"Yeah." Will pushed the last bits of his food around his plate. "I'm sorry, I don't think I'm in the mood to eat another bite. How about you?"

"I can always save it for later. It's perfectly fine."

Will sighed, and stood up from the table. "Let me help you clean up, at least. None of these look dishwasher-safe."

"Well, I shall never deny myself continued presence in your company," Hannibal smiled, picking up the plates. The leftovers he carefully packed into ceramic containers and tucked away into the refrigerator, and then he turned back to the sink where Will was organizing the dirty dishes. "I can do the washing, if you would care to do the rinsing and drying?"

"Yeah, sure, I can do that," said Will.

They stood in silence, side by side, cleaning the dishes. It was all very domestic, in Hannibal's opinion, and he wondered how long it would last. He had replaced much of the kitchen with his own design, the sink included. Had he known more about Will's handiwork at the time, perhaps he would have kept the outer pipes.

"Ah, crap!"

Hannibal chanced a look over at Will, who had accidentally splashed water on himself while rinsing out a handful of spoons. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, sorry, got your floor wet," Will muttered, but Hannibal wasn't listening. The water had soaked into Will's white shirt, and he could see right through it.

Unbidden, his hands reached out on their own and touched the damp patch. Hannibal stared into Will's eyes, and Will looked back.

He took a deep breath.

"Do you need a change of clothes?" Hannibal asked.

Will blinked, and looked down. "Nah, this can go in the wash. Anyway, it's just water. Not like it's going to stain, like coffee."

"Nonetheless, the sun is starting to set, and it is cold out. And I would be a poor host if I allowed you to go back home in a wet shirt." Hannibal moved in a little closer.

"I'm literally across the street, Han – Dr. Lecter – !"

Hannibal untucked Will's shirt from his trousers, and leaned in until his lips brushed the curls behind his ear. "Yes, Will?"

Will grasped his hands, but did not pry him away. "What – what are you doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing?" Even as Will protested, his breathing was elevated, his pupils dilated. His heart was beating faster and faster. Hannibal could hear the blood in his arteries as if they were his own. "Do you want me to stop? Tell me to stop and I'll stop."

Will swallowed.

"No. Don't stop. Don't stop."

Hannibal turned them around, away from the sink, and in one smooth motion he shoved Will back up against the kitchen island, boxing him in with his arms. Decades of perfecting his iron self-control, yet less than a minute in Will's presence and he could no longer hold back.

To call it a kiss would be an understatement. A wild beast rose from within his chest, rutting. Hannibal snapped at Will's lips, licked into his mouth. He had to taste him, from the very source. He had to climb all the way inside, make himself a home in Will's warm, soft innards. He wanted to live there.

Will gave back as good as he got. His teeth scraped at Hannibal's tongue and lips. His hands found their way to Hannibal's back, clawing, drifting lower. Within his fingers, that normally created such incredible things with only a few taps of a keyboard, he had the meat of Hannibal's ass clenched in a vice grip, so hard that it hurt, and yet Hannibal couldn't bear to let a single moment of it stop.

He could feel himself, straining against the front of his trousers, his arousal bordering on painful. Will, too, was similarly affected, grinding down on where Hannibal's knee had wedged itself between his legs. With every thrust, his legs parted further, welcoming Hannibal deeper into his core.

Hannibal yanked at Will's belt, the button and zipper of his trousers. Revealing him. And it was beautiful in its obscenity and crudeness, the red head flushed with blood, glistening wet, peeking out of the top of his boxers. He absolutely had to touch. Unbidden, his hands lurched forward, and his fingers curled around Will, warm and wet and *dripping*.

"You too," Will whispered hoarsely.

"Together," Hannibal agreed, and twisted his wrist. Will gave a sharp cry and doubled over, even as he struggled to free Hannibal from the confines of his dress pants. Then both of them, each of them wrapping a hand around both their cocks, still joined at the mouth and chest, pressed together so close Hannibal struggled to tell whose hands were whose, where one started and the other began. Slick fluid sliding everywhere, chests and stomachs lined up and legs tangled, until neither of them could tell where one started and the other began. It was too much, and yet not enough. Every painting and opera and meal and murder and moment in his life seemed to pale in comparison to this, and the promises of more to come. Right here, right in the center of the kitchen, his hearth and home, that he had won by conquest from the torn up corpse of Mrs. Jones. He would defile this spot with his own essence, wipe clean the slate of Will's memory of his predecessor in this house, write over it with his own presence and art.

"*Fuck,* don't stop – "

"You have no idea how much I've wanted this – "

"God, *please*, don't stop – "

" – wanted you, every second I saw you and waited for you – "

"Hannibal, *ah* – "

" – torture, every moment – "

" – *ah, hah, Hannibal – nngh – !*"

Will arched his back and bucked upwards into Hannibal at the same time Hannibal bowled over. Hannibal fit his teeth to Will's neck, growling at the collar of his shirt *that dared present an obstacle*, and nothing would prevent his access of that sweet nectar of life, he needed to feel the thrum of Will's pulse between his teeth and blood on his tongue. Marking him. Will was his. Nothing would stop him, neither cloth nor man nor empires nor time.

They climaxed in unison, Hannibal coming so hard he felt his vision gray out at the edges, one hand still buried in the thick curls at Will's nape, the other coated in the hot splash of their combined release.

Hannibal did not know how long he stood there, mind pleasantly buzzing with the numbness of pleasure. Eventually, his heavy breathing relaxed into something more controlled, and the tacky feeling of congealing cum made itself known on his fingers.

A piece of himself, and of Will. Hannibal brought his hand up to his mouth for a taste, and licked himself clean.

Will watched him, voice rough. "Waste not, want not," he said.

Hannibal smiled and pressed his lips to Will's again, licking and nipping at him until he was permitted entrance. The remains he had not yet swallowed, he shared with Will. Feeding it to him, coaxing it down his throat as he smeared the leftover streaks on his hand on the back of his shirt, around his neck, through his hair, the curls as soft and lovely as he had always imagined them to be.

A piece of Will, and himself. Now a part of himself, and Will. Acceptable cannibalism. The only form of cannibalism he had ever indulged in, since that cold winter in Lithuania so long ago. The rest were merely pigs.

Parting was like pulling apart two rare earth magnets, their physical entanglement sacrificed in order for Hannibal to be able to look at Will's face again. His wine-dark eyes, glazed over in pleasure, his full lips bitten bright red, his pale cheeks flushed a dark pink.

Will looked down at the stains on the fabric of their shirttails. "There's another garment of yours I've ruined."

"And yours as well. Even Steven, as they say," Hannibal replied. He leaned in, planted another kiss to the side of Will's neck, licked his way upwards, and whispered into his ear, "I would dearly like to do it again, if you are amenable."

Will swallowed.

"Yes. Amenable."

A parting kiss, physically gentler than what they'd started with, but no less ferocious and claiming in its intensity. Unable to let go, and yet knowing that they must. The high of transcendance giving way to the banal reality they had to inhabit. Being forced to let go of Will for even a second felt like a rip in his chest.

"Listen," said Will, "that felt great, but I really think we should, er, clean up. That can't be comfortable."

Hannibal hummed. "I've had worse."

Will began tucking himself back into his clothes and hurried to the coat closet. Before Hannibal could protest any further he had zipped up all the way, hiding any visual evidence

of their indiscretions from view – with the exception of his flushed cheeks and tousled hair, though Will's hair was always like that. "I'm sure you have, Mr. Surgeon, but unless you want me to walk back across the street looking like I got mugged, I should probably clean up. *Separately,*" he added sternly, upon noticing the gleam in Hannibal's eyes.

"Of course. Thank you, Will. That is most considerate. I have a guest room with a shower, if you would like?"

"It's fine, I – I have to get back to my dogs anyway."

Damn it. It was a pitiful excuse, and they both knew it. Will had just checked in on his dogs a few hours ago before he came back to eat with Hannibal.

But Hannibal merely strategically retreated. To gamble too hard and too quickly now would only serve to scare him off. "Of course. Please see to their needs, and thank you for today."

So close, and yet so far. But Will's walls were made of sturdier stuff. Hannibal needed to up his game if he was going to push Will to his breaking point.

Later that evening, as he predicted, Hannibal received a phone call.

"Hello, Jack."

Chapter End Notes

[1] You will not believe how many major security breaches are caused by a tiny typo. For example, Cloudbleed. TL;DR, someone did

```
if (reading_position == dont_read_past_this_point)
stop reading
```

Instead of

```
if (reading_position >= dont_read_past_this_point)
stop reading
```

Which caused some Cloudflare servers to spit data out that should NEVER be public, for example, cookies and authentication codes. [↑]

[2] Honeybees and other eusocial insects are great analogies for distributed systems. Basically, one small unit following a limited set of rules, is not so great alone. But put a bunch of them together and suddenly you have something that functions greater as a whole. [↑]

[3] The slime mold in question. The system that the slime mold came up with isn't exactly the same as the real life Tokyo network – it's slightly more efficient for the slime mold's parameters, whereas I assume the Tokyo network had other design considerations like accessibility and existing infrastructure. [↑]

[4] Counting Systems are much more complicated than you might think! And this is just from humans on one planet. [↑]

Network

Chapter Summary

It's always nice to have old friends for dinner.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Hello, Jack."

"Dr. Lecter, good to hear from you. How have you been settling in?" Jack asked casually, as if the two of them didn't know what Jack was really calling him for.

Still, Hannibal played along, if only out of basic courtesy. "Quite well, thank you. And you? How is everything back East?"

"Oh, you know, same old. But I wanted to talk to you about something, since this seems to fall into your area."

"Well, if it is anything to do with medicine or psychiatry, whatever help I can provide would work best over email," Hannibal replied.

"Yeah, see, that's what I wanted to talk to you about. There's been a new killer popping up. I'd like to consult you on a profile. And normally, I'd ask around locally, but in this case, I think you're my best shot. What have you heard of the Bay Hunter?"

Playing coy, Hannibal asked, "Is that what they're calling him?" Not very imaginative, but then again, the Chesapeake Ripper wasn't very imaginative either.

"Bay Hunter, Bay Butcher, various news outlets are trying out terms and there's not one that stands out yet. But surely you've heard on the news."

"Yes, I've heard. And you want me to help because of all the psychiatrists currently living on the West Coast, I am the one you know best."

"Got me in one. Listen, I'm on a flight over to San Francisco airport right now, so why don't we meet tomorrow sometime around noon? I can share with you the pictures the local police have taken in the meantime, as well as some files from previous killings we think are related."

"Jack, I – "

"Alright, thanks. I'll see you tomorrow. Bye."

Hannibal frowned, and stared at his phone where Jack had just hung up abruptly.

Rude.

As soon as Will was out the door, he immediately jammed his hands in his pockets, looked at the ground, and speedwalked across the street towards his own house. He rucked up the collar of his jacket high and hoped to god that none of his neighbors would suddenly appear on the street to see him up close. The back of his head felt uncomfortably damp, tacky come drying in his underwear where Hannibal had smeared his hand over his hair.

The dogs barked excitedly when he opened the door. A successful traversal of No Man's Land, into the safety of the trench. The dogs jumped up and gathered around his ankles and waist, sniffing curiously at what were no doubt strange new smells on him, and Will turned red when that reminded him of how Hannibal also really, *really* liked to do the sniffing thing.

It had felt good. Great, actually. Incredible, in a way he had never felt before. Will had dabbled every now and then, but it had always been physical. His mind deliberately shut off. Just a means to an end for both of them, no emotional expectations otherwise.

But this was new, and he wasn't sure what to think about it.

Will awkwardly stayed inside for the next few days partly because he was trying to see if his emotions would just naturally resettle to their old norm, partly because he didn't want to seem too clingy, partly because he genuinely needed to get some work done, and mostly out of an inability to do anything else. His house felt emptier than usual, even though he had lived that way for the past decade with no issues.

He should have known Hannibal wouldn't leave him alone. Then again, maybe he was, on the inside, hoping that it would be the case anyway.

Hopsy was barking. The other dogs were also excitedly gathered around the door. Even without seeing Hannibal through the windows, he would have expected the man anyway. After all, they'd gone on a date together – and it was a date, wasn't it? – then basically made out, and soon after Will had fled the scene and not even texted back. Belatedly, Will had realized that he was most definitely being rude, but every time he looked at his phone with the intention to dial Hannibal his fingers chickened out on him.

But there was no ignoring this, and so Will dragged himself to the front door and opened it. "Hi," he said, pointedly staring at the ground.

Hannibal didn't seem to be offended by the lack of eye contact, which he wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not. "Hello, Will. How are you?"

"I'm fine. Really. I'm just…I'm sorry, I should have called you back. I'm not good at this." Will stepped backwards. "Maybe we should continue this discussion inside."

"But of course," Hannibal accepted the invitation with a casual nod. "I only wished to make sure I haven't overstepped any bounds. If you did not enjoy it, I hope we can still remain

friends."

"No – no, I did like it," Will said quickly. "I'm sorry. I'm just very inexperienced and awkward. But I was being honest, earlier. When I said I was amenable."

Hannibal's grin grew wider. "Good," he said. "Then you won't mind if I do this?" His hand crawled to Will's hip, and over.

Will swallowed. He could feel his face heating up. "Yes. I mean, no, I don't mind."

"Or this?" Hannibal's other hand planted itself on his lower back, and his entire front was pressed up against Will's.

This time it was Will who made the first move. Arms around Hannibal's shoulders, one on the back of his head – that was how you were supposed to do it, weren't you? He was already here; might as well go the full nine yards. Their lips met, and suddenly the emptiness of the past few days were washed away, as if Hannibal could just suck the dullness of daily life out of his mouth, exorcise away the ennui with a few nips of the teeth. A deep clean of the tongue, years of nothing flushed away in an instant.

It was only the vague awareness that the dogs were still there, watching them, that prevented them from going further. Will broke away, staring at the thin trail of spit still connecting them until it broke. He stole a glance at Hannibal, whose brown eyes looked almost red in this lighting, entirely swallowed up by the black of his pupils. Will was certain his own eyes were the same.

"Come to dinner with me this weekend," Hannibal whispered. "And please don't run from me again."

"I make no promises," Will muttered. "Running's all I know how to do."

"Then the dinner, at least."

"Who else is coming?" Will asked warily.

"I intended to invite some of my old friends from the East Coast who have come to visit," said Hannibal. "Introduce you to them. But if you don't wish it, then it needs only be you."

Will frowned. "Who exactly are these…East Coast contacts of yours?"

"You might have already met one of them."

Will blinked. "What, Jack Crawford? Really?"

"I know you two got off on the wrong foot, but I would hope that all my various circles of friends would get along. Jack and his team have come over to investigate the recent case, and have asked for my help once again with profiling. I thought hosting a dinner would be a good chance to catch up, and hopefully allow the two of you to meet in a less stressful setting. Patch up some differences, and all that," Hannibal said smoothly.

"What, you *don't* enjoy being the mutual friend between a bunch of people who hate each other?" Will joked. "I can't promise anything, but I'll try to be civil. Who are the others?"

"Well, there is Dr. Alana Bloom, a fellow profiler and former student – I was her advisor when I was still at Johns Hopkins. I also thought to invite Mrs. Lee's niece and her two coworkers, who I've met on several occasions while working with Jack. And any other neighbors you might like. Of couse if Beverly is coming, then Mrs. Lee must come too."

Will sighed. On one hand, he hated these things. On the other hand, he really didn't want to disappoint after he already ran the first time. "I'll think about it."

"You needn't come if you don't want to," Hannibal wheedled.

"You say that as if I ever have a choice when it comes to you. You said you'll be inviting Mrs. Lee too?"

"Of course."

In the end, there had never really been any question. Will grabbed a nicer button-down than his usual plaid, because he drew the line at any sort of monkey suit (if he didn't wear one when meeting the goddamn CEO, he sure as hell wouldn't wear one for some FBI guy).

"Be good, guys," he said to the dogs, making one last pass to check that they were all fed and had enough water for the next few hours. He'd just let them out a few minutes ago, and they would probably all be fine until morning, but he wanted to make sure.

"Once more unto the breach," he muttered to himself, and started walking across the road.

"Will!" Mrs. Lee exclaimed cheerfully. "Beverly, this is Will; I've told you about him. He's the guy who took Rashid's spot after Rashid was promoted when I retired. Will, meet my niece, Beverly."

Beverly narrowed her eyes at him, and put a hand on her hip. Will could immediately see the familial resemblance. "Will? Like, Will Graham?"

"Which one?" Will asked cautiously. "There's at least a thousand of us in the U.S."

Beverly grinned. "The Will Graham who Jack bitched about for weeks after he came back from California last year. You know him?"

Will laughed. "Ah, yeah. The phones incident."

"Yeah, well, anyone who makes Jack bitch about something is alright in my book." She surreptitiously glanced over her shoulder, where Jack Crawford was luckily being distracted by Hannibal and Dr. Bloom. "Don't tell him I said that, though."

Will couldn't help hiding the tiny grin that snuck its way onto his face. She and Mrs. Lee had that air about them that made them impossible not to like. "I'll try not to." Will hadn't talked to Crawford yet, and he was hoping to stay out of his way for the rest of the dinner.

"Anyway, Will, meet my coworkers, Price and Zeller. Or, as I sometimes call them, Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Zee."

"You never call us that!" Tweedle Zee protested.

"Now I do. I should have started years ago!" Beverly laughed. "Nah, their real names are Jimmy and Brian. But you can call them Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Zee if you want."

"I'm just happy to be here," said Price. "After all those years listening to people rave about how great Dr. Lecter's food is, I finally get to eat some. You know getting an invitation to his table is notoriously difficult. People like Alana, or Jack and his wife, get invited. Lab rat peons like us are usually not important enough."

"I wouldn't know," Will said. "I'm unfamiliar with the exclusivity of the East Coast. But I'm sure he was planning to accommodate you guys anyway. I asked him to invite Mrs. Lee, since I didn't want to *completely* be outnumbered by non-tech people."

It was at that moment that Will felt eyes on the back of his head. He turned his face a little bit, and sure enough, that was Jack Crawford, glaring at him. Will sighed. It seemed as if Hannibal's hope for a civil evening was likely to be dashed on the ground like a porcelain teacup.

The food was served, and everyone was herded to the dining room. Will stole a glance at the seating arrangements and groaned. Hannibal was at the head of the table, and Will at his right, but Jack Crawford was on Hannibal's left – putting him directly across from Will.

The bastard did this on purpose. Will never understood teachers who tried to make kids who hated each other sit side-by-side in an effort to make them get along. It almost never worked.

At the very least, Mrs. Lee was sitting next to Will, and Dr. Bloom next to Jack, in an attempt to keep them mellowed, probably. Small mercies. *Now another three hours of small talk.* The food was delicious, so Will slowly picked at it in an attempt to not have to talk to anyone.

It didn't really work.

He was only half-listening to whatever Mrs. Lee was talking about when suddenly, out of nowhere, Zeller's loud voice cut through the conversation.

"Wait, how much do you guys even get paid?" Zeller, ever lacking in decorum, asked.

"Zeller!" Beverly chided.

Will tried to keep his face as stony as possible. "I am not at liberty to publicly discuss my compensation."

"Ballpark, man. What's your tax bracket?"

"I am not at liberty to publicly discuss my compensation."

"Is it true that they pay interns six figure salaries?"

"Interns are classified as hourly, not full-time employees, so by definition, they cannot have salaries," Will answered blandly.

"So how much do *they* make per hour?"

"I am not at liberty to publicly discuss their compensation."

Zeller wasn't deterred by the monotone answers. "If I quit my job right now and took an online coding course, how much could I expect to make?"

"Probably not a lot."

"I don't mean compared to *you*, man; it's fair that I'd make less than a guy who's been in the industry for ten years. But how much can a guy starting out make?" Jack shot Zeller a venomous look, but Zeller paid him no mind.

A shrug. "Probably not a lot, if an online coding course is all you're doing."

"What's the best language to start with? I heard a lot of people use Java, but Python seems easier to start with."

Will glared at him. "You realize coding and programming aren't the same thing, right?"

"What's the difference, then?"

"Coding is learning a foreign language. Programming is knowing the intricacies of that language well enough to become a legislator for that country, where any laws you write must be easily understandable, come with a full plan to implement it in a time and cost-efficient manner, and not have any loopholes, otherwise the next guy who reads what you wrote will drag you over the coals and bitch about you on social media at best, and a bunch of lawyers will sell knowledge of those loopholes on the black market at worst."

Zeller took a moment to digest his admittedly strange analogy. "So how do I become a programmer, instead of just a coder?"

"Go to school, or teach yourself."

"Where do I do that?"

Internally, Will was screaming. "Where does anyone learn anything these days? Google it."

"Is it true that new grads make like, a hundred grand straight out of school?"

"I'm not in charge of payroll; I wouldn't know."

"Don't you have underlings? If you lead a team you should know what the people who report to you make, surely."

"None of them are new grads. I don't have new grads on my team, ever," Will said.

"So how much do they make?"

"I am not at liberty to publicly discuss their compensation."

"Zeller!" Beverly yelled. "Stop bothering him! Why don't you just search it on Glassdoor when you get home?"

"I was just curious!"

Mrs. Lee took pity on him and explained, "The salary range is very large because it is dependent on experience, performance, employer, location, and what the job itself even is. Most software developers in the middle of their career will be making around $70k a year, or less if they live in cities with lower costs of living. The average company does not have the revenue of tech or finance giants, so they pay their programmers what they can afford. But yes, since you were wondering, the standard for entry level hires at established companies in the Bay Area is around the $100,000 range, plus stock and benefits."

Zeller choked. "You're kidding me. I don't know if I believe that."

"Okay. Then don't," Will snapped.

An awkward silence.

"Did *you* make that much right after you graduated?"

Will rolled his eyes. "Of course not. That's today's money, and I graduated over ten years ago."

"But they make that much now?"

"Software is easily scaled in the way manufacturing and services aren't. Tech companies can produce large profit margins in relation to the amount of employees they have," said Mrs. Lee.

Zeller looked furious. "I definitely picked the wrong major in college!"

"Well, I'm sure you software engineers are living an exciting and lucrative life, typing away at your keyboards. Meanwhile, some of us *actually* get our hands dirty, doing hard work and saving lives," Jack announced pompously, glowering at Will. "Of course, it would have been a lot easier if we received cooperation from your company, isn't that right, Mr. Graham?"

What remained of the earlier atmosphere died within an instant. Will's face shut down into something simultaneously expressionless and radiant with darkness, and he leveled Jack with a stare that could have turned the gorgon Medusa to stone. Even Hannibal was somewhat shocked. He had expected some remaining vitriol from Jack, but Hannibal had underestimated just how much the man genuinely hated Will.

This seating arrangement couldn't have turned out any better, even if he had tried.

Will's smile was all ice. Nonetheless, he replied politely, "Easier for you, at that one point in time? No doubt. Easier for the world in the long term? Absolutely not."

"You know, he killed two more people when they let him back out, before we could catch him again and lock him away for good," Jack said, faux-casually. "Doesn't it bother you, knowing you could have saved them?"

Without missing a beat, Will replied blithely, "No, not really."

That gave Beverly, Price, and Zeller pause – until now, they hadn't yet experienced the full extent of Will's nastiness firsthand, as Jack, Alana, and Hannibal had in that fateful meeting so long ago.

"…er, what?"

"I don't know if I could have saved them, so it cannot bother me," Will explained. "And I find your attempts to shift blame, as if I, a civilian, had anything obligation for responsibility whatsoever, hypocritical and irresponsible."

"Excuse me? How am I being hypocritical and irresponsible?"

Hannibal shared a private glance with Alana. She seemed a bit worried. Hannibal, on the other hand, continued to eat his dinner with relish. Free entertainment. Not even the greatest operas could compare to his beautiful Will.

"This is about the entire unlocking the phones thing, isn't it? Need I remind you, we *explicitly* explained to you why what you wanted us to do was impossible, and offered an alternative solution. You refused to understand and accept it. You demand we accommodate your desires without affording us the same courtesy."

"What courtesies has the FBI not afforded you?"

"Freddie Lounds criticizes the FBI for restricting freedom of the press when you drag her away from crime scenes and censor information about an active investigation. You call her criticisms unfair, and justify your actions as part of your duties – "

"She contaminates crime scenes and tips off the very people we are trying to catch about our activities."

" – which is *fine*, if you would have let me finish. You had every right to protect yourself when an outsider interferes with your job. Right?"

"Of course."

"So why is it, then, that a company well-known for its safe devices, is not also allowed to push back when outsiders interfere with *our* job?"

"That's different!"

"Interesting mental gymnastics, there. So when you protect yourself and those you are responsible for, it's acceptable, and yet when we do it, it's somehow our fault that people we have no control over die, at the hands of other people we have no control over?" Will asked. "Please stop acting like my job doesn't matter, and that any goals that don't align with yours are automatically evil or worthless."

"We save lives. What do you do?" Jack accused.

Will leaned back and regarded him calmly. "Saving lives isn't always about rushing in with guns blazing and bullets flying. I'm sure you save the lives of many potential victims in your line of work. But if we're judging by amount of lives saved, then being an ambulance driver or suicide hotline operator – this country has a shortage of both –would be a more efficient use of your time. I'm not saying what you do is unnecessary, because it truly is a noble profession…but it's not the only thing in the world that matters. So if you would please stop being so condescending, that would be great."

"As opposed to, what? Hiding in your silicon towers, sitting behind a screen, typing away all day?" Jack challenged.

"Yes, actually. You disparage my work as somehow less important and noble than yours because it doesn't involve 'frontline action', but do you know how many people utilize our services and devices? Yesterday I caught a vulnerability that, had it made it into production, would have forcibly turned on location sharing, even for devices where it's supposed to be private or disabled. You think that's not such a big deal, and that we tech types overreact at every perceived overstepping of our privacy, so I'll remind you that *active duty servicemen*, including your non-retired Marine friends, are among our users. Gee, I wonder what this bright red dot of activity in the middle of some otherwise sparsely inhabited Syrian desert can mean? [1]"

"Fine, but that was *one incident* – "

"So you say. The world runs on software. How many people would die if the spreadsheets hospital used for patient data stopped working, or worse, displayed the wrong information between patients? What happens if a power grid gets attacked [2]? Traffic lights stop working, fatal car crashes pile up, people on home ventilators stop breathing, emergency rooms are overwhelmed, people can't access important government services, official disaster response capability is crippled. That's not to mention all the indirect deaths caused by a slump in the economy because so many businesses suffer a productivity hit."

"And what is the likelihood of that ever happening?" Jack challenged.

"If World War III breaks out? One hundred percent," Will snapped. "The point is, Agent Crawford, you never hear about the work we do because us being right is the *normal state of things*. In fact, we do such a good job every day that no one even thinks twice about it, even when the difference between a regular day and catastrophe is literally one line of code. I don't deny you credit for catching bad guys, but no one applauds the average mother who raises her kid to not go on a murdering rampage because that's expected behavior. Except, to fit the analogy, it's like saying the wrong thing *once* at any point in the kid's life could suddenly turn them into a raging psychopath, and yet society *still* demands that they all turn out to be

perfect functioning adults. So I stand by my prior statement. Hunting bugs saves more people than hunting killers, and you can drop that 'we are the epitome of righteousness act'."

"It is not an *act*, and you are changing the subject – "

"Oh, please. You *know* that your absolutely *reprehensible* attempts to shove responsibility of your failures onto me are wrong, and you know *I know*, but you're still doing it anyway because you think that it will somehow give you more leverage in this little dick measuring contest *you started*, one which I don't care about but am nonetheless forced to participate in – because your need to win every single real or perceived challenge to your barely significant power outweighs the thoughts and feelings of literally everyone else in the universe. So I will tell you this for the *last time*: I am not your *subordinate*, to manipulate, coerce, gaslight, and bully as you please. You try that shit one more time, and I will contact my attorneys for a restraining order and a harassment lawsuit. I'm sure *your* supervisors at the FBI would love to know you're spending your time bothering civilians instead of, chasing, you know, actual suspects," Will declared with finality. "Now why don't you go do the damn job you're getting paid for, and leave me out of this."

The entire room was completely speechless. No one had never seen anyone speak this way to Jack Crawford before, ever. Only Hannibal and Alana ever stood up to Jack on a regular basis, and theirs was more of a firm resistance. But Will seemed to approach every verbal war with the end goal of total annihilation.

And then, right as the shock crested to its peak, Will turned to Hannibal with a sweet smile and asked, "Pass the salt, please?"

Hannibal could feel his stomach do a flip.

The dinner had mostly ended by that point. Jack had finished the meal as quickly as possible and stormed out. Beverly and her coworkers also left fairly quickly, mostly because they didn't want to make their boss any angrier than he already was. Mrs. Lee, on the other hand, was close to laughing uncontrollably.

"You need to give more public talks, Will," she had said. "Don't you agree, Dr. Lecter, Dr. Bloom?"

Alana sighed. "You were…a bit harsh, Will."

"Oh, please," said Mrs. Lee. "He started it. Don't tell me you agree with Jack's position?"

"I understand why Jack is angry, but honestly…yeah, you were in the right. Jack was way out of line, trying to discredit your work. He's…he's a bit stressed out at the moment. And he can lose sight of the big picture in pursuing his goals. Chronic tunnel vision." Alana stood, laughing softly. "I should get going; it's getting late. It was nice speaking to you, Will. I'm glad you brought your perspective to the table, but remind me to never get into an argument with you!"

"Same for me. Good night, Will, Dr. Lecter, Dr. Bloom," said Mrs. Lee. "And please keep in touch, Dr. Bloom!"

Hannibal showed the two women to the door and helped them into their coats. When he returned, Will was starting to clear away the table.

"I apologize," Hannibal said, moving to gather the remainder of the dishes. "I hadn't realized what state he was in. Had I known it would come to this, I might have had two separate dinners."

Will sighed. "Sorry if I went a bit too far with Jack. I know he's your friend. It's a bad habit. When I go off about something I care about, I basically have no filter."

"To be honest, he is the sort of friend that takes a great deal of energy to be a friend to," Hannibal confessed. "I fear he has grown too used to having his orders blindly followed to consider the repercussions of his words and actions. You may have dealt him a harsh blow tonight, but it was necessary to make him a better version of himself."

"Is this more of a bitter medicine situation, or breaking eggs to make an omelette situation?"

"I would say it is halfway between cracking a rib to perform chest compressions, and removing a tumorous organ. He will be angry for awhile, but eventually he will see the error of his ways."

"Will he?" Will asked skeptically. "He's had the entire previous year to reflect and I don't see any change."

"Mmm, enough about Jack. How about you, Will? Would you like to stay?"

Will turned his head to accept a kiss from Hannibal, his cheeks stained medium-rare. "I would, but my dogs, and I also have a 9 a.m. meeting tomorrow that I have to get to. It's the only time we have that exists in within regular hours that can accommodate both our west coast and European offices."

Hannibal didn't even bother to hide his disappointment, and leaned in to steal another kiss, if only to see pink pigment splash across Will's face again. His wonderfully shy boy, how gloriously he looked with blood under his skin. Hannibal wondered what he would look like when he finally got blood on top of him. "Very well then, go see to your duties."

It wasn't until Will had gone home that Hannibal realized, no one had ever told Will that Jack Crawford used to be a Marine.

Chapter End Notes

[1] This actually happened to the US military IRL. Except that it wasn't so much a security flaw as it was this one fitness/social media company publishing a heat map of

their users around the world, which ended up revealing the locations of US military bases, patrol routes, favored jogging paths, etc. To be fair, it wasn't the company's fault, but the military's, for not having the proper policy in training the troops about the matter. [↑]

[2] In December 2015, Russia successfully cut off power to 230,000 Ukranians, making the world's first successful remote cyberattack on a power grid. Power grids in general are low-difficulty, high-payoff targets: most of them are poorly defended / run on outdated software / managed by non-software-security people, and hitting them can very quickly cause huge amounts of chaos. The US, Russia, and China have all acknowledged power grids as one of the first targets in the event of WW3. [↑]

Application

Chapter Summary

Philosophy, God, and a visit from an old friend.

Chapter Notes

Going to be taking a quick break next week because I will be busy. Will resume updates the following Saturday.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next few weeks progressed as usual. Hannibal and Will continued to speak, cook, and eat together regularly, this time excluding Jack. Though the entertainment value was too great for Hannibal, Jack himself always declined knowing Will would be there, though the official excuse he made was that he was too busy working on his case. Naturally, there was little to no progress – Hannibal hadn't dropped any new displays since the stag. Local news stations were still throwing out a few monikers for Hannibal's new identity, but until the appearance of a third tableau little information was forthcoming in that regard.

On the days where Hannibal could not see Will, he would give him a call, deliberately timed to be right after Will woke up, before he had entirely disguised his natural accent.

Will would always respond with some charming dialect variant of, "Whaddya want?", to which Hannibal would respond,

"Can't I simply want to see your face and hear your voice?"

and Will would inevitably call him something along the lines of "Ugh, you big sap."

It should have worried Hannibal, how he found Will increasingly charming the ruder he was, but he couldn't bring himself to care.

"I told you," Will said, rolling his eyes, "I haven't done tech support since I was in high school."

"I know this is below your pay grade," Hannibal said, winking. There was, of course, nothing wrong with it. Occasionally it was a little slow, but that was expected behavior for a school-issued model.

Will turned pink. "It's okay. I don't mind. I like doing this for you."

"And how fortunate for me."

"You know, you don't have to keep breaking your laptop on purpose just to see me," Will teased.

"But then how else would I get to see the inside of your beautiful home, and your brilliant mind at work?" Hannibal asked.

"Flatterer." Will shook his head. "You know, maybe *I* should be the one purposely breaking your laptop. Then you would have to pay me with dinner."

"Ah. Pity for the laptop, then."

Will snorted. "This is a piece of garbage anyway. You know, I expected that kind of thing from public institutions, but Stanford's supposed to be a private school." He sighed. "Jokes aside, I'm really hoping what we have works out. You know, you're the first proper relationship I've ever had. I'm usually not good with people. I don't like people. I prefer machines."

Hannibal stepped closer and leaned over the back of Will's chair, wrapping his arms around his shoulders. He tucked his nose into the crook of Will's neck and inhaled sharply. There was the scent of dog, of course, and pine sap. Something a little salty, like the ocean breeze. The metallic smell of electronics. And underneath that, something that was purely Will.

"Are you not good with people because you don't understand them enough, or because you understand them too much? Does everything you see and learn touch everything else in your mind? Do you prefer machines, because they provide no fodder for associations and dreams to shock your values and appall your decency? Are these constructions of glass and metal the forts in the bone arena of your skull for the things you love?"

"Should I expect a bill in the mail for your services next week, Doctor?"

"Not at all, unless you decide to bill me for this tech support session in reverse. I merely enjoy observing." Hannibal tilted his chin. "Same as you, I suspect."

"In all seriousness, I didn't find anything *wrong* with the computer the first time I checked, and if you've been running your virus scans regularly then there's not much else I can do. You don't seem like the type to be dumb enough to go on any weird websites using a work laptop, anyway." Will's smile turned mischievous. "Unless there's something you haven't told me?"

Hannibal nipped his ear. "Be kind to me, Will, I must have *some* secrets to keep you interested."

"It might be all the additional custom software that the school forcibly pre-installed onto the laptop is not optimized for this particular OS. I'm checking the logs for the version history and it looks like the custom educational software company that made all these extra programs just pushed out an update last week. It's possible that it was just a bad update. You should try

asking your colleagues if their school-issued computers are also having problems, and all of you can launch a complaint at the same time – if you do, they'll be quicker about getting off their asses to fix it. In the meantime, you can ask the school administrators if they'll allow you to remove or disable some of the programs that you're not currently using – "

Hannibal gently took Will's chin and turned it towards him, and their lips met. Will tasted faintly of coffee and little else. He frowned. "Have you eaten yet today?"

Will's shrugged. "I got a little busy with this," he said, gesturing to his workstation, where four large monitors had been set up side-by-side, the two at the ends turned vertically.

"You should eat," Hannibal chided. "Come to lunch with me."

"Sorry. I'm almost done."

"What are you working on, anyway, that has taken up so much of your attention? Must I compete with your machines too?" Hannibal teased.

"I didn't really have any other plans for this weekend. I was just working on this project. If it's too boring for you we can do something else. I can always finish up later."

Hannibal gave Will's head a gentle pat. "No, I love watching you work. What are you doing?"

"It's a little hard to explain, but I'm basically throwing stuff at this thing and seeing if it breaks. I think I found a rather weird spot here that doesn't make sense, so I'm going to poke it with a stick and see if it's alive. If it is, I'll report it so that they can fix it."

"Why did you do it in the first place?" Hannibal asked.

"Why does anyone do anything?" Will asked. "I wanted to see what would happen."

Hannibal's hands paused in their perusal of Will's curls. Not for the first time, he wondered if he was actually not the ocean, but the one drowning.

"And what happens is that you end up gaining control of a supposedly impenetrable machine, in ways previously thought impossible," Hannibal was saying.

For someone with no formal training in computer science, Will thought, Hannibal picked up on certain concepts astonishingly quickly. He always knew the man was smart, but he had an inkling that Hannibal was the type of person who was always just that much more smart than he let on. He would have to tread carefully from here on out.

"That's the nature of computers. You give them instructions, they do exactly what you tell them to do. The handling of information. The difference is that we humans have leaps of intuition, of unexplained assumptions and intentions," Will explained. "A computer does not know any of that. And in that thin gap that exists, the difference between assumed intention and reality, is an astonishing about of control."

"You are driven by curiosity. And exploration of that curiosity gives you an astonishing amount of control. Tell me, Will, does your control make you feel powerful?"

Will supposed a psychiatrist would say he liked controlling other things because it helped him feel like he had control over his own life. But Will hadn't been required to see a mental health professional since that incident his first year of college, and no one was going to know anything now.

Really, Will liked controlling things because he enjoyed the quiet sense of power that came along with it. He enjoyed the knowledge that he could take down air traffic control towers, halt the world shipping industry, or expose government secrets on pastebin [1] from the comforts of his own home and never get caught, if he so chose. He enjoyed the feeling of being able to do something, *anything* he wanted, because it made him feel like God.

He didn't do the aforementioned, because there was honestly no good reason to. He didn't want his own life disrupted the next time he got on a plane or ordered a package. There was, however, nothing wrong with taking out his internal aggression on crime lords and pedophiles and embezzlers. They deserved it. And doing bad things to bad people who deserved it made him feel good.

It wasn't like he was going out and *killing* people. He was just…exposing evidence that was already where in such a way that law enforcement could easily get to it.

And…occasionally planting evidence when he *knew* they were guilty but were too good at covering up their tracks.

This was all right, because he was just trying to be helpful. And if he ever got caught, which was highly unlikely, he could probably pass it off as himself merely being a force of chaotic good. He wasn't trying to satisfy his baser urges; he was simply a noble gray hat hacker, a figure that in recent years had embedded itself in the nation's consciousness, beside the archetype of the wild card action heroes, the guys that did the right thing even if it meant breaking the rules. Stick it to the system, as it were. No judge was going to hand down a particularly harsh sentence to the man who anonymously helped lead police to the biggest child pornography ring in recent history, without asking for anything in return.

He wasn't *hurting* anyone, except for the *bad guys*, and they were going to prison as the law intended. He wasn't passing judgment; he was just bringing judgment *to* them.

Oh, but he would dearly love to be the one passing judgment. Personally being the one to wrap his fingers around the throats of wrongdoers and squeezing until the warm wet blood ran over his palms would feel so much better, so much better than these empty proxy attacks –

`pkill -f` [2]

No, don't go down that path. He wasn't a monster. He had spent too much time and effort building his life as it was now, to risk throwing it away and getting incarcerated. He was sane, stable, and well liked by his peers. That was the whole point of all his efforts, wasn't it? To not be institutionalized? Locked away and deried as the crazy one, *Will Graham was gonna snap one day, I always knew it*. He wasn't about to prove them right. Everything he

had *done* up until this point was meant to build enough of a support system around himself to *prevent* that shit from happening in the first place.

And yet the adrenaline rush he got every time he successfully infiltrated some poor fuck's system seemed to get less and less powerful recently. Still, it would have to be enough. Will didn't want to think of what he'd have to do as an alternative otherwise.

"Doesn't control make anyone feel powerful?"

Will shook his head. "Playing God. A dangerous pasttime."

"Are we not made in his image?" Hannibal pressed.

"It's all fun and games until we end up like Victor Frankenstein."

"Destroyed by our own creations."

Realism took over. "A mutual destruction. God does as he likes because he does not have to suffer consequences. As beings of physical matter we do not have that privilege."

"God's terrific. He dropped a church roof on 34 of his worshippers in Texas last year, while they sang a hymn."

Will paused in his typing. "Did it make him feel good?" he asked.

"It made him feel powerful."

Hannibal gave him an enigmatic smile, closed-mouthed, not revealing any of his crocodile teeth in the back.

"And did power make him feel good?" Will parried.

"I suppose power must feel good. Why else would he do it all the time?"

"I don't believe God dropped that church roof. Man dropped it. Man, in the form of either incompetent engineers, or irresponsible officials not maintaining upkeep on the building," said Will. "I suppose the incompetent or noncomprehending must assign all that they do not understand to God."

Hannibal cocked his head to the side. "Do you not believe in god at all?"

"God exists for those who believe Him to," Will replied noncommittally.

"God is naught but a creation of man, and yet remains beyond our comprehension. Can God create a stone so heavy that he himself cannot lift it, or write a text so dense that he himself cannot understand it, or create a creature so powerful that he himself cannot defeat it, a mind so brilliant he himself cannout outthink it?"

"Can God microwave a burrito so hot that he himself cannot eat it?" Will laughed at Hannibal's offended face at the sheer thought of a microwaved burrito. "I don't know about

God, but we humans are definitely capable of all those things. *God* knows I see it every day in my work."

"Do you really?"

"Of course. God exists whether in your beloved Renaissance paintings, or in emotionless wires and circuits. Once upon a time, building something required the designer to know how it worked. Not anymore. It is so easy, to create a machine smarter than you, that can think freely, without knowing how it thinks at all. Are you familiar with the board game Go? You might have heard it called Weiqi or Baduk."

"I am. My uncle's wife was Japanese. She taught me how to play, though I admit I have greater talent in chess. Still, I have always appreciated the history and elegance of the game. It was one of the four main achievements for literati in ancient China, alongside music, painting, and calligraphy."

"Only one piece, and one available move, yet the complexity – the number of possible configurations of the board – is greater than the number of atoms in the observable universe. Deep Blue, the chess playing machine that defeated Kasparov in 1997, was heavily programmed with the help of other high ranking chess experts manually laying down rulesets and moves based on a given position. People think it's impossible to do the same for Go – and they're right; Go is way too complex, far more so than chess. But that doesn't mean building a machine to beat a top Go professional is impossible in and of itself."

"You believe it will happen in our lifetime?"

"I don't believe. I know. They will publicize it in the next few months."

"Truly?"

"This is insider information, technically, but let's just say, as part of my job, I get full access to the entire source code database of any new startup we acquire, since that's where most of our vulnerabilities originate. So now, before any integration occurs, my team and a few others comb through their code and fix it. And we continue to assist them in maintaining their security."

"I presume you've seen something truly revolutionary in one such startup, then."

"You might have heard the term 'artificial intelligence' or 'machine learning' thrown about a lot here – great buzzwords to con venture capitalists out of enormous sums of money. It's legitimate in this case, though. What we're dealing with is a specific type of program: humans created it yet they don't know how it works, because it was designed to teach itself. And it can learn and improve far faster than any human, as it constantly plays against itself."

"It is very telling, how simple strategy games reveal most reliably the way humans think. If you are a god of a program which you do not understand, perhaps God cannot understand His own creations either."

"This Go-playing program is different from the machine that beat Kasparov because no human gave it set rules on how to play. It discovered these strategies for itself. Now, obviously, it still relies on numbers and probability to make choices, but the point is, it created this probability grid for itself, and has its own metric for searching – often fifty, sixty moves deep. And despite being a machine that only makes said decisions on said numbers and probability, the moves I've seen it make…if you were there, you wouldn't deny that it is capable of creativity, of making novel moves humans have never thought of before. Moves that professionals would say are stupid, and yet, it *wins*. *Every single time*." [3]

"A literal God in the Machine, then. Deus ex Machina was originally a term used in ancient Greek theatre, when a rigged mechanism was used to represent the gods, but has since been co-opted into use as a generally poor narrative device. Tell me, Will, do you associate your control over your machines with godhood?"

"I know what gods look like, Hannibal, and you are not one of them. You could be the cleverest man in all of human history, and you could never beat alphago, not with your brain made of meat [4]."

"What then, if you create yourself in any way you wish? Are there not purely human things still out of reach for machines?"

"Not for long."

"Then again," Hannibal leaned in, "I do know of one thing that meat can still do better than metal."

Will blinked, then turned beet red. "You're horrible. Absolutely horrible. And I thought you seemed so prim and proper when I first met you. Who wears a three-piece suit to a coffee shop, honestly – mmmph!"

Hannibal pinned him down with his full weight, not so much kissing him as devouring every part of his body he could reach like he was a feast to a starving man. A full-on bite to his lip, a nip to his ear, a hard suction on the pulse of his neck that make Will so glad he had the option to work from home because it was sure to leave a mark. Will could hear himself whining, a high, needy sound, intermingled with Hannibal's grunts and moans, all his composure shredded.

Somewhere in the haze he could hear buttons popping, a fog of sensation. Soft, fleeting touches blurred into something hard and bruising, all cold air and hot moisture and sharp teeth and shared breath. Hannibal hoisted him into the air in a dead man's carry and in one blink of an eye Will found himself on his bed, no memory of ever leaving his workstation or the hallway. Helpless to instinct, they squirmed and rutted against each other like it was their last day on earth.

Will grabbed Hannibal by the collar and ripped his shirt off. The fine cotton rended at the seams, buttons popping and bouncing off the ground and lamp and windowsill in tiny little plinks.

He didn't know how expensive it was. He didn't care. He'd ruin every single damn suit Hannibal had and he'd make Hannibal beg for it. He felt Hannibal's teeth dig into his shoulder and couldn't tell if it was just spit or blood or lube running down his chest. He didn't care. It didn't matter. Will dug his nails into Hannibal's back and clawed his way down. Hannibal's back would be all red lines tomorrow. It didn't matter. He didn't care. A sharp bite to the nipple set his cock jerking as far up as it could go, and his mind even further. His hips snapped and he could feel Hannibal's own hardness pressing down against his, no longer a man, but a mindless rutting beast, heat riding some creature half stallion half stag.

Will grabbed Hannibal by his cheekbones and dragged his face back up, and then it was the filthiest kiss Will had ever had in his life, speared on the tongue of the Devil himself at one end, and his clawed fingers at the other. Then Hannibal brushed over his prostate and Will felt his hips jerk again, and oh he thought it couldn't get anymore depraved than this, except Hannibal had withdrawn his fingers and was now slicking himself, lining himself up –

And a hard *snap* of his hips and he was pushing in, in, in, *all the way*, and *oh god* Will had never felt so full in his entire life.

"Oh, *god*, yes…please, ah, *yes*!"

Hannibal pulled out and slammed back in again, and again, and again, a steady pressure constantly dragging across the core of his pleasure, mounting, mounting, mounting. Will could hardly think anymore, beyond chasing the very next moment. Living one second at a time. On the down strokes Will could only think of wanting Hannibal inside him, and on the up strokes Will could only think of wanting to keep Hannibal inside him, to drag him inside *that much deeper* –

"Oh *god* – "

"God's not here. Just you and me. Look at me," Hannibal whispered. He grabbed Will by his hair and dragged his head backwards so he was forced to make eye contact. In the dim afternoon sunlight, it was like staring into two puddles of blood. "*Look at me, Will*."

With a strangled cry, Will's vision whited out, and over the cliff they went, together.

Sunlight.

Hannibal blinked awake blearily. He had not remembered a single thing beyond their moment of mutual climax, the evidence of which was still staining themselves, and the sheets.

The bed. The dresser. The lamp. The closet doors. The windows. The trees outside. The rug. Hannibal felt his eyes travel around the room, each item somehow feeling foreign, like they didn't belong. Like the entire world was just the two of them, and everything else extraneous extraterrestrial additions. As if someone had put cheap dollar store stickers on *La Primavera*.

He had had numerous partners, lovers, one-night stands over the years. He had felt the basic physical pleasures of sex. But he had never before experienced such a bone-deep core of

satisfaction that would leave him unaware of his surroundings for several hours, and then still unable to comprehend his environment on waking.

It was for this reason that he didn't register the doorbell at first. Just a faint buzzing in his ears that slowly coalesced into recognition. Like looking at something under a microscope slowly come into focus while one was still adjusting the lenses.

He shot a glance at Will beside him, still sound asleep. Hannibal sat up and searched for his clothes, which were most likely unsalvageable at this point. He turned to Will's closet. Hannibal considered this fair. If Will was going to ruin his shirts, then Hannibal deserved a replacement. In the form of an oversized tech-branded hoodie, and a glimpse into yet another internal element of Will's life. Hannibal pulled it on and zipped it up, well aware of how absolutely ridiculous he looked in it. After some further consideration, he grabbed Will's bathrobe, hanging on a hook over the door leading to the bathroom, and pulled that on, too.

They both smelled like him. Hannibal used a little bit of water to comb his hair back into a somewhat respectable presentation.

The doorbell rang again. He wondered who it could be. A delivery person, perhaps, but that seemed to be an extremely persistent delivery person if that were the case. Or Jack causing trouble, though Jack usually had the decency to call beforehand. Hannibal turned the knob and pulled the door open.

As soon as he saw who was on the other side, however, he realized he had made quite possibly one of the biggest mistakes of his life.

"Hi Dr. Lecter!"

His heart sank.

Oh, *no*.

Chapter End Notes

[1] Pastebin is a site used to post text, usually used by programmers for source code, but also very popular among hackers for publishing large lists of passwords and other data breaches. [↑]

[2] `pkill -f` is a command used to force a process on a computer to stop. [↑]

[3] In reality, Deepmind (the company that created Alphago) was acquired by Google in 2014. Alphago itself beat Lee Sedol in 2016, more ten years ahead of schedule. In this universe, I moved the timeline up a few years so Will and Hannibal could talk about it.
Quick video on machine learning
Alphago documentary, a bit long but very worth the watch! [↑]

[4] They're Made of Meat: a great sci-fi short story. It's about two alien beings made of light that cannot comprehend the fact that Meat can be sentient. [↑]

Modem

Chapter Summary

Hannibal and Will exchange gifts, after a fashion.

Chapter Notes

Okay, I am SO sorry for the late update. I literally lost the laptop with my login info + all my writing notes all those years ago (so I literally could not even access this account).

Turns out I left it at my parents' house and they just...put it away and didn't tell me? lmao

(To be fair, it was an old laptop, and they hadn't realized I was still using it. It took like five hours to boot up fully because of how behind on updates it was. Lol.)

Hannibal blinked in a futile attempt to will the apparition before him away. No such luck.

"Franklyn," Hannibal asked, "What are you doing here?"

Franklyn, ever completely unable to read the room, bounced on the balls of his feet excitedly. "I didn't remember which house number was yours so I just knocked on every single one. I saw you on the news! You're helping work that new case!"

A lesser man would have snapped Franklyn's neck right then and there. It was only Hannibal's iron control, and the knowledge that Will was sleeping right down the hall, that stayed his hand.

"What. Are. You. Doing. Here."

Franklyn must have seen something peeking out from behind the veil (Hannibal was beyond caring at this point), because he fidgeted nervously for a second. However, his desperation and idiocy won out over whatever modicum of self-preservation he had left in him. "I wanted to see you! You just left without a proper goodbye! It was all so sudden!"

Hannibal sighed. "Franklyn, if I recall, I did give you a goodbye. I told you months ago that I was moving and would be giving you a referral."

Franklyn had whined and begged and pleaded, and Hannibal had put his foot down. He thought it would have been the end of that at the time. Clearly, he shouldn't have underestimated Franklyn.

"I don't like the new one you referred me to! I want *you* !" Franklyn whined.

"Franklyn, you need to make your own friends. What about Tobias? What happened to him?"

"I don't know! I don't think he wants to be my friend anymore. He's stopped talking to me for ages and – "

"Franklyn. No. Stop," Hannibal said firmly. "This is highly inappropriate. Please leave, or I shall report you to the authorities for stalking."

"But – "

"Good *day* , Franklyn," Hannibal snapped, and shut the door in the man's face. Perhaps Will's rudeness was rubbing off on him, but Hannibal couldn't bring himself to feel ashamed of his behavior.

What kind of obsessed maniac would drive across the country like that, just to be with one man, honestly? Franklyn was beyond help.

Will blinked awake to see that the other side of the bed was empty. For a second, he thought that Hannibal might have left, but then he heard Hannibal's voice coming from the front of the house. He couldn't discern exactly what Hannibal was saying – only that he sounded extremely annoyed and agitated. A novelty, for sure. Hannibal could be irritated by a lot of little things, but few of those irritations actively agitated him.

Will waited until the sound of the voices died down, and the click of the front door shutting. A few moments later, Hannibal appeared back in the doorway of the bedroom.

"Who was that?" Will asked.

"No one important," Hannibal said, voice tight and clipped.

"And yet you look like someone just shat in your coffee," Will said blandly, before laughing at the unamused expression on Hannibal's face. His former tightness, however, had given way to fond exasperation.

"Incorrigible boy, whatever am I to do with you?" Hannibal asked.

Will hummed. "I suppose I've gone too long without discipline. Maybe you ought to punish me." He lay back, stretching lazily, his grin completely unrepentant.

"I definitely *ought* to punish you," Hannibal snarled, pouncing in bed back over him. Will laughed out loud as he was pressed hard into the mattress. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt this wild, this free. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had a conundrum this difficult to solve. It was in Will's nature, to poke and prod at a system to see what

vulnerabilities there were. Hannibal was no different. An even tougher nut to crack. A fort around a person suit. His personal castle.

They struggled on the bed, rolling around in the unwashed sheets, still filthy with their combined scents. Just as Hannibal had him pinned, the shrill ring of a phone split the air.

Hannibal exhaled loudly.

His phone rang again.

"Not your morning, is it?" Will asked.

Hannibal chuckled wryly. "I would let it go to voicemail," he said, checking the caller ID, "but knowing Agent Crawford, he will not give up. Best to give him assurances now."

"Of course. Answer the man, Hannibal," Will whispered. "He's a *federal agent*."

Just as Hannibal hit the answer call button, he felt a warm wetness between his legs, and nearly jumped. Will looked up at him innocently from where he had his mouth wrapped around Hannibal's cock. He pulled off with a positively indecent pop.

"Well? What are you waiting for?" Will whispered. "Jack Crawford isn't a very patient man, is he?"

Hannibal bit back a whine. "Jack," he growled.

"Hannibal, I need you here as of five minutes ago. I'll text you the address."

Will engulfed him in his mouth again and moved his lips down, down, *down*, *all the way*, and swallowed, letting his throat contract around the head.

"Jack, you are my friend, so I must remind you that – I am not your subordinate. You cannot just call me outside of scheduled hours – *hn* – please send me the pictures later, and I shall help you *in my own time* ."

Will pulled off and wrapped is tongue around one of Hannibal's testicles, and sucked on it lightly, then moved to the other.

"Hannibal – "

"No, Jack. Now, if you please, I do have prior engagements," Hannibal responded, and hung up the phone, quite abruptly. Shockingly, appallingly rude. But Will made him so.

"Well? What did the *nice man* want?" Will asked, his big blue eyes twinkling innocently.

Something odd, because if it was a murder, it certainly wasn't Hannibal's. Another killer running around was possibly important, but… "I suspect you know quite well that what he wants is irrelevant, wicked boy," Hannibal whispered, and with all his strength, grabbed Will by the shoulders and forced him face-down on the bed, amid Will's cacking laughter.

"Alright," Will said, emerging from the shower. "That was fun, but I gotta go check on the dogs."

Hannibal could only stare at how the water glistened and dripped off his body, glinting in the morning sunlight. He looked like a water nymph, come to persuade Hannibal to trade all that he held dear and risk some untold terrible curse for the carnal knowledge of his flesh. "Let me make breakfast, at least."

"How about I give the dogs their breakfast while you give me mine? It shouldn't take more than a few minutes. Unless you want my nine dogs to swarm you for homemade sausage all over again."

"You say that as a joke, but I would be delighted to," said Hannibal. Any excuse to see more of Will's soul. He deftly shot a look at his phone, which he had flipped to silent, still filling up with a slew of Jack's angry texts.

"Well, I don't think I have much proper food or cooking equipment at my house, as you would call it, but the stove works fine," Will acquiesed. He frowned. "That FBI guy still texting you?"

Hannibal sighed. "Sadly, yes."

"You don't even *work* for him anymore; what the hell? Does he get off on deliberately overstepping other people's boundaries or something? I'm surprised he hasn't gotten sued already."

"Oh, he has, a few times," Hannibal murmured, debating on whether he should go to his refrigerator to grab the "pancetta" or the "prosciutto". The belly meat would be fattier, but he had been meaning to taste-test how the curing process had gone on one of his older victims' hind legs. "But they were all settled out of court, away from the cameras."

"One would assume that the FBI wouldn't want someone causing them so much legal trouble. Or is it his ability to 'get results' what shields him, in which case, I do understand in a terrible way, since there's definitely plenty of highly successful execs who have decades of sexual misconduct allegations in their file."

"In any event," Hannibal said, picking up his things, "Jack Crawford will no longer be bothering us today. I have every intention of letting my voice mail robot deal with him in my stead. Do you have cutting boards?"

"They are not as nice as yours, but yes, I have them," Will said. "I'm not totally uncultured, you know."

Hannibal shot him a fondly skeptical look, and grabbed his chef's knife. "Apologies, Will, but the state of some of your other cooking implements would make me weep."

"You cry at slightly overdramatic Italian musicals," Will pointed out, snickering at Hannibal's scandalized face.

Eventually, they made it to the end of breakfast in one piece, Hannibal still complaining about Will's audacity at calling his beloved operas "Italian musicals" (*"They are not all Italian, Will; there are plenty of German and French operas too, not to mention – "*).

"Look, I'm sorry I called them *musicals* ," Will said, not looking the least bit sorry. "I was only trying to get a reaction out of you. I know how important they are to you."

Hannibal sniffed.

"Also, I got you something," said Will. "I was planning to wait for a special occasion, but no time like the present, right?"

Hannibal raised an eyebrow at the small, nondescript cardboard box, feeling rather pleased. "What is it?"

"A microwave, for you to heat your burritos in."

"Will…"

"I'm just kidding! Don't make me ruin the surprise. Open it, see what's inside."

It was a little cylinder, about the size of a can of San Marzano tomatoes. "It looks like a speaker."

Will smiled. "It's a smart home device. You can speak to it, and it will respond to your voice commands. For example, if you hook it up to your thermostat, or your lights, it can adjust the temperature and turn the lights on and off. So if you're working in the kitchen, and your hands are dirty, you can just tell it what to do. There's other applications too, this is just what I thought of off the top of my head."

"How interesting," said Hannibal. "I have heard of these, but I haven't seen this particular model before."

"It's a new prototype [1], so it might be a bit janky at first, but eventually, it'll get used to the sound of your voice. Like Siri. Normally something like this would require a lot of administrative red tape to get the beta testing credentials, but I just pulled some strings since I know a couple of guys in the natural language processing team, and they bumped me to the head of the list. Did some security analysis for a different thing of theirs a few months back."

"Thank you Will. That was very thoughtful," Hannibal said, turning it over in his hands. "I still prefer hearing your real voice though."

"Sap," Will said gruffly, but his ears were pink.

After the dishes from their hearty breakfast were washed, they settled back onto the couch. Will was fiddling with something on his laptop, and Hannibal was checking his emails on his tablet, when he noticed a new email from Jack. Ah, it had an attachment. The files that had been promised, finally delivered after Jack eventually realized that Hannibal was no longer

willing to cater to his every whim at every hour of the day. Hannibal downloaded them, shot a glance at Will sitting right next to him, and opened them.

Sure enough, Will saw the pictures out of the corner of his eye, and Hannibal could pinpoint the exact moment the colors entered his mind.

"I apologize, am I distracting you?" Hannibal asked. "I can always look at them later. It's not exactly conducive to a relaxing day, is it?"

Will gulped. "No…it's…it's fine."

"If you're uncomfortable, it really is no problem for me to look at them in my own time. Or, I can leave and look at them in the privacy of my own home. It really is no trouble."

"What are those ones, anyway?" Will asked, ignoring him. "A different case?"

"Hmm?" Hannibal asked.

"Look, that's the Janus killing, and then that's the stag thing. But then this one is a dude that got turned into a…banjo looking thing…"

Hannibal shot Will an unamused look. "That is a lute, Will."

"Don't poison me with your city slicker lies," Will said. "But anyway. Are these two cases that he jammed into one file?"

"No, this is all the same case. The most recent one. Now, this viola was discovered this morning. I presume this is the one Jack called me about, since we still don't have much evidence processing lab reports here, only the pictures."

"I don't know. This looks like two different guys. Like, whoever did the Janus murder and the nightmare stag thing is one person. But the lute…isn't really his style."

"What makes you say that?"

"Well, there was another set of murders that made national news, right? Some guy got turned into a cello. I just think it's that guy."

"Though the styles are similar, the cello murder was done in Baltimore. Do you think the same killer would be operating on opposite sides of the country?" Hannibal asked.

"It's not like he killed someone in Baltimore two days ago and then killed someone over here yesterday," said Will. "Maybe he's just on vacation, I don't know. Maybe he moved."

"How are you so sure that the Janus killer didn't perform this murder?"

"Hannibal, I don't think a guy that plonks a stag made out of five different courses on a major motorway for attention, is the sort of guy who would demean himself with a single measly banjo-looking lute. If he wanted to copy the Maestro, or send some sort of message, he'd make a string quartet, or even a whole damn orchestra, to prove he was better – "

Will was still speaking, but the blood in Hannibal's ears had drowned out the words. Every single insight Will had provided was on the nose as ever, and he wasn't even a professional.

Will was going to figure it out one day, and Hannibal had no idea what he would do when that day came.

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[1] Smart home devices are common and commercially available now, but back in 2013, they were a super new and wacky thing. Apple's Siri had only just come out in 2011, and the first Amazon Echo, didn't come out until November 2014. [↑]

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